

Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal

Volume 10 | Number 1

Article 4

5-2021

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Recommended Citation

Friedman, Audrey A., Myra Rosen-Reynoso, Kierstin M. Giunco, Charles T. Cownie, and Cristina J. Hunter. "Educating Others: A Vocation Promoting Meaning, Purpose and the Universal Apostolic Preferences." *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 10, 1 (2021). <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol10/iss1/4>

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Educating Others: A Vocation Promoting Meaning, Purpose and the Universal Apostolic Preferences

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Abstract

Teaching as discerned vocation in urban Catholic schools has the potential to provide a far-reaching, integrative space for enacting the Universal Apostolic Preferences. This research explores the reflections of thirty-one novice teachers, enrolled in the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps (UCTC), a Jesuit university program in the northeast. This program supports the development and formation of novice teachers through graduate education, living in community, full-teaching responsibilities in an urban Catholic school, mentoring, coaching, and professional development. Teachers completed an online interview that elicited responses about what it means and the factors that contribute to leading a life of meaning and purpose. Responses illustrated intentionality and planning with the aim of leading a life that was beyond-the-self. Finally, the Universal Apostolic Preferences of “Walking with the Excluded” and “Journey with Youth to Create a Hope-filled Future” resonated in all responses. Findings suggest that teaching as a discerned vocation in urban Catholic schools offers a far-reaching space for enacting integrative Universal Apostolic Preferences as teachers commit to taking up this work as vocation. Furthermore, the space serves as a model for evangelizing students, families, and communities to take up this work.

*It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct.
—Viktor Frankl*

Introduction

That people are driven to find purpose, the *why*, the reason for living, motivates one's life, giving it inherent value.² Self-transcendent purpose is manifested in creativity (producing something), experience (living through a critical experience, like love or trauma), or attitude (adopting a positive attitude towards situations beyond our control). Purpose gives life meaning and contributes to well-being in adults and adolescents.³ Having meaning and purpose in life promotes optimal human development. Those who have found this purpose are psychologically healthier than peers who have not.⁴

There appears to be a growing consensus among researchers that a purpose represents a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self.⁵

Although adults have usually established purpose and a path in life by age 30, only 20% of adolescents have developed a clear purpose in life. Therefore, Damon urges educators to nurture adolescents' explorations into a noble purpose.⁶ Bronk found that adolescent exemplars of purposeful lives attributed childhood volunteer experiences to participating in something greater than self.⁷ Thus, adolescents must be "encouraged to engage in a broad and varied search for purpose... and to focus on how they plan to make progress toward their purposes in life," especially toward a noble purpose.⁸ Helping students develop a sense of meaning and commitment to purpose in life is a goal of Catholic education. It follows then, that those who are called to teach in Catholic schools must themselves engage in the work of refining and leading lives of purpose and meaning.

Engaging, inspiring, and educating for vocation is particularly relevant in Jesuit higher education, especially in light of the Society of Jesus's Universal Apostolic Preferences 2019-2029 (UAPs).⁹ Teaching in urban Catholic contexts calls educators to accompany young people on a journey to create a hope-filled future, and to live Catholic social teachings. Demonstrating

preference for the poor, marginalized, and traditionally excluded contributes to caring and sustaining our common home in service of the common good. Sustaining oneself within the context of this demanding profession requires that one be committed to this work as a vocation. Discerning this vocation requires time and space. Jesuit colleges and universities "create institutional space for purpose exploration"¹⁰ by not only nurturing and inspiring exploration into vocation but also sustaining realization of vocation through discernment. As Pope Francis has commented, prayer and discernment are foundational to the achievement of the other three.¹¹ Jesuit colleges and universities actively engaged with the UAPs are committed to the formation of individuals committed to discernment: that is the invitation of the divine into their decision-making.

As the program under study is a Jesuit graduate program that supports young, urban Catholic school educators, knowing how these educators live and enact the UAPs in the context of a discerned vocation of meaning and purpose and where they are on a trajectory toward living a life of meaning and purpose is essential. The purpose of this study was to establish a set of baseline profiles of urban Catholic school teachers in this program. This research asks:

- 1) How does this group of Catholic urban school educators define "meaning" and "purpose" in their lives?
- 2) How do these educators perceive the relationship between a life of meaning and purpose and their discerned vocation?
- 3) How does their discerned vocation call these Jesuit formed educators to enact the Universal Apostolic Preferences?

Purpose in Life

Although used interchangeably, purpose and meaning are different. Malin, Reilly, Quinn, and Moran observe that: "individuals seeking purpose ask not only 'what gives my life meaning?'" but more specifically, 'how can I contribute to or connect with the world in ways that give my life

meaning.”¹² Purpose is goal-directed and intentional, dynamic and life-long, a beacon for intentionality, and a mental representation of self-in-world informing human existence and structuring action over time.¹³ Purpose is manifested in goals which guide progress to an ultimate aim and is integral to identity—a central, self-organizing series of targets which frames behavior, assumes core goals, provides direction and enthusiasm, and informs decision-making.¹⁴ Purpose facilitates resilience, persistence, and authentic expression. These factors cohere to yield a life that is significant.¹⁵

Damon, Menon, and Bronk 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.¹⁶ The beyond-the-self distinction stems from Frankl’s descriptions of meaning as “others” oriented. Thus, purpose is a far-reaching and stable goal that has genuine implications beyond the self and offers continuous direction. Dissanayake, Kamble, and Patil found that purpose “drives people forward” leading to “higher level[s] of satisfaction...positive affect [which] explains why the sense of purpose in life is beneficial for subjective happiness and life satisfaction... and a lasting effect on subjective well-being”¹⁷ and a life that is coherent. Purpose is not merely acting, but articulating motivation as structured behavior. Coherence is not merely experiencing the world, but actively interpreting it.

Intentionality of purpose is often equated with vocation. Gregg views purpose as “God given,” essentially a vocation or calling and a goal which is not self-decided.¹⁸ She notes that although the concept of vocation is deeply rooted in religious history, more contemporary theologians explicitly connect vocation to purpose as vocation gives purpose. Vocation and calling assume a sense of meaning and purpose and are divinely inspired, but can be a calling from God or a calling grounded in the needs of the world.¹⁹ In viewing teaching as vocation, teaching may be “a calling grounded within a religious worldview, as coming from God and forming part of a divine plan for one’s particular life” but may also “be grounded in a humanistic worldview, in which a call to teach can be understood to originate from those in need of teaching services.”²⁰ Purpose includes “self-

enhancement and supportive mutual relationships, development of authentic self, and a focus on the needs of others, observing that a unique emphasis in the search for psychological well-being is to de-emphasize concerns with self-enhancement processes and focus more on self-renunciation through service to others or on deepening a relationship with a spiritual reality.”²¹

Spirituality has a significant positive correlation to both resilience and grit in college students and is a significant predictor variable in the development of self-control and grit for young adults, with faith and religiosity predicting success.²² Kash found that urban 5th graders scoring high in religiosity and purpose scored lower on depression and suicide.²³ Kuh, Hu, and Vesper compared the variables of religiosity and sense of purpose at several liberal arts, faith-based universities and found that Denominational Liberal Arts universities significantly shape the values of the students they serve.²⁴ The context in which purpose is nurtured is critical; thus, Jesuit universities have the responsibility to nurture beyond-the-self purpose in their graduates, especially those whose charge is to develop it in others. This responsibility echoes the call made of all Jesuits and Jesuit apostolates through the UAPs, to support others in coming to see, hear, and feel the needs of others with special attention given to the poor, oppressed, excluded and young.²⁵

Meaning in Life

Meaning is cognitive and depends on how one understands purpose. Meaning in life comes from involvement in fulfilling goals that integrate into coherent self-esteem and a broader social system.²⁶ Meaning requires an undeniable sense of calling that is socially accepted and supported.²⁷ Reker and Wong define meaning as the “order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment.”²⁸ Schnell offers a hierarchical model of meaning.²⁹ Perceptions are at the foundation of meaning in that one perceives a stimulus and generates a response in the form of action, which is the next level of the hierarchy. Actions are movement towards the next level: goal. Goals form the core of meaning in life. Sources of meaning compose

the next level. Sources of meaning are “basic orientations [that] motivate commitment to and direction of action in different areas of life” which “enable a meaningful structuring of life without explicitly striving for meaningfulness.”³⁰ At the highest level of the model is meaning in life. At this level, meaningfulness has four dimensions: self-transcendence, self-actualization, order, and well-being and relatedness. Self-transcendence aligns with generativity and orientation toward the immaterial and spiritual. Self-actualization derives from developing and honing abilities, talents, and capacities which lead to achievement. Order assumes retention of values, morality, tradition, and reasoning. Well-being and relatedness can relate to loving self, others, and community and enjoying life’s pleasures. Sheldon suggests that congruence occurs when the individual selects goals that contribute to a higher purpose.³¹ Purpose and meaning in life correlate with social connectedness, leading to increased participation in volunteer situations and stronger connection to “community, family members, friends.”³² Without meaning and purpose, there is little reason to live.

Vocation, Purpose and Meaning, and Universal Apostolic Preferences

Clydesdale describes the challenges and difficulties colleges and universities face as a result of “embracing the supply-side model of student learning and development that is marginally effective at best.”³³ He strongly urges institutions of higher education to engage students in “sustained conversations about questions of purpose, the result is a rise in overall campus engagement and recalibration of post-college trajectories that set graduates on journeys of significance and impact.”³⁴ In a climate where things are falling apart and the center is teetering on collapse, seeking meaning and purpose in life is even more crucial, as is understanding what inspires one to pursue the vocation of teaching, especially in urban Catholic education. As Romero-Ramirez observes, educating devoid of vocation disregards the human element, as it

see[s] in others (students) a box or object of knowledge deposit without valuing what they really are: people with dignity who require preparation for life, for work, for relationships with others, with God,

with themselves and with their environment. In this case, teachers with a vocation are the protagonists of the changes in the human dimension that our society demands and requires a lot.³⁵

Jesuit work in education seeks to “make people aware of the burning need for reconciliation, of the many who are estranged, vulnerable, alienated” resulting in realizing a new culture that lives Gospel values and teachings. This mission requires that our “hearts speak to hearts.”³⁶

The spark that leaps from heart to heart and sets our common vision aflame is freedom itself, the yearning for life and love, justice and meaning, the desire to share in questions, mediated by all the university disciplines, that pull us toward a horizon beyond ourselves, beyond the exigencies of “making a living” or launching a successful career. We want those who are part of our educational mission to dream of and to build, step by step, a new culture based on Gospel values.³⁷

Pope Francis likens this spark to magis “the fire, the fervor of action, that rouses us from slumber.”³⁸ Teaching as a vocation fully manifests what it means to lead a life of meaning and purpose as “purpose represents a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self.”³⁹ In his analysis of Barth’s view of vocation in the context of *Church Dogmatics*, Nimmo observes that “in the event of vocation, the command of God reaches the individual as a particular demand to pursue one concrete course of action.”⁴⁰ Teaching can be viewed then as vocation, a call to service, which is directed at others.⁴¹ This calling is unique to the individual as is the course of action that one pursues to fulfill the responsibilities of vocation; yet, the work of vocation serves Jesus Christ and cooperates in the work of Jesus Christ.

Informed by Morisy’s work on the Catholic Jesuit mission of accompanying others on the journey, the Universal Apostolic Preferences address becoming a better self, committing to community,

and “journeying out” to ameliorate the struggles of others, which is essential to “promoting a healthy and safe environment for children and young people so that they can develop their full potential as human beings.”⁴² Urban Catholic schools serve traditionally excluded children and families who live in poverty and suffer the gamut of generational injustices. Educators who are called to teach in urban Catholic schools assume the responsibility of journeying out, “walk[ing] with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice; to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; and to collaborate in the care of creation, our Common Home.”⁴³ These educators followed the guidance of Superior General Arturo Sosa, S.J. and have discerned that these students are “the most vulnerable and excluded persons in their midst and [have found a way] to walk closely beside them.”⁴⁴ Their vocational journey is the essence of what it means to lead a life of meaning and purpose. Intentional, focused, motivated, altruistic, compassionate, and selfless, urban Catholic school educators commit to improving the life chances of the excluded, collaborating with students, parents, and colleagues in solidarity to create opportunities and foster dispositions toward constructing a hope-filled future that not only realizes justice but also works for the common good of all.

Rohm observes that “to educate for vocation, institutions must form graduates with greater capacities to engage diverse situations with moral sensibility, make choices despite ambiguous circumstances, and persist on the path,” noting that faith-based institutions have a responsibility to nurture and develop persons “who can respond to God, to life, and to the world with vocational strength and joy.”⁴⁵ Engaging, inspiring, and educating for vocation is particularly relevant in Jesuit higher education, especially in light of the Society of Jesus’s Universal Apostolic Preferences. Teaching as vocation in urban Catholic contexts calls teachers to accompany young people on a journey to create a hope-filled future and to live the Gospel, demonstrating preference for the poor, marginalized, and traditionally excluded toward caring and sustaining our Common Home in service of the common good. Jesuit colleges and universities “create institutional space for

purpose exploration”⁴⁶ by not only nurturing, engaging, and inspiring, exploration into vocation but also sustaining realization of vocation through discernment and prayer. Thus, Jesuit higher education through the education of the whole person and in partnership with programs like Urban Catholic Teacher Corps (UCTC) provides place and space to cultivate and sustain a culture of vocation.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this study were teachers in the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps (UCTC) program at Boston College. UCTC is part of the University Consortium for Catholic Education, a partnership of Catholic colleges and universities with the Archdiocese of Boston, Catholic schools, donors, and Catholic educators and students with the shared mission to both educate and form Catholic school teachers and to meet schools’ needs for teachers. UCTC is a two-year, Catholic teacher development and formation program in which members concurrently complete graduate-level coursework in curriculum and instruction, teach at a partnering urban Catholic school, live in community, and receive UCTC mentoring, coaching, and social-emotional support.

Thirty-one UCTC teachers participated in this research. Participants included twenty-five females and six males whose ages ranged from 21 to 27 years. Eleven graduated from Catholic undergraduate institutions and twenty from non-Catholic (combination of public and private) institutions. All identified as white except for one of Latino(a) and one of bi-racial background. Twenty-seven identified as Catholic, three as Christian, and one respondent reported “other” as he/she was raised Catholic but did not practice the faith. Years of experience teaching ranged from one to three years; many had taught in more than one type of school; twenty-six participants had taught in public schools and ten in Catholic. At the time the instrument was administered, twenty-five participants were licensed educators. Participants for this study were recruited via email in June 2020.

Procedures

All participants received an email with a link to an online qualitative instrument on Qualtrics.⁴⁷ This instrument is a modification of the Youth Purpose Interview.⁴⁸ The questions ranged from: naming things that are important in their lives and their reasoning for the importance, the activities they are engaged in, world problems they think are important and what they would like to do to address them, and identifying their life goals. Due to various challenges to conducting these interviews in-person, it was necessary to adapt the interview protocol and design it as an online interview using Qualtrics essay response option. The researchers used the Youth Purpose Project: Interview Coding Process for Forms of Purpose Determination which is a four-step process.⁴⁹ The initial step is to determine the most important goal or area of activity for the respondent. The second step is to identify the category and domain of purpose that the aforementioned goal or activity best aligns with. Thirdly, is to assess if this activity is a driving force in the respondent's life. And finally, step four is to assess the form of purpose via specific indicators. All quotations included in findings and discussion were taken from teachers' responses to the online interview questions.

We analyzed the data using a modified consensual qualitative research (CQR) analysis.⁵⁰ CQR was developed to study the experiences of psychotherapy and clinical supervision; however, it has been used in other domains of psychology. Since the areas under study require in-depth descriptions of inner processes, researchers felt that a team-approach that integrated the various cultural backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints of each member in the analysis and ensured consensus in interpretation was critical. Therefore, for this study, the authors considered CQR as an appropriate data analysis method. Although the qualitative data gathered was not in the form of interviews but rather essay responses, the research team analyzed the raw data independently and then met weekly to discuss results. Any discrepancies between team members' analyses were discussed and negotiated to consensus. Results were then sent to two auditors familiar with the study but not involved in the data analysis process. The auditors checked the team's analyses. Raw data were downloaded from

Qualtrics and "transcripts" for each individual participant were created with ID codes. Researchers read each "transcript" to get a general sense of the participant. Then, each researcher blocked the data regarding activity or goal based on the various levels of importance indicated by the respondent. Subsequently, the team began a line-by-line analysis of each individual "transcript" for emergent themes and then coded for domains of purpose that best aligned with each participant's reported goal or activity and whether or not the reported activity/goal was a driving force in their life. The data were then coded for core ideas of purpose: beyond-the-self purpose, self-life goal, beyond-the-self-dream, and self-dream. And finally, cross-analysis was conducted to gain insight into the frequency of domains and core ideas across the entire sample.

Findings and Analyses

Several themes emerged in educators' responses about the factors, goals, and actions for reaching these goals that contributed to their perceptions of purpose and meaning in life and their pursuit of teaching as vocation. Themes appear in the order of importance to participants and are integrated with analyses. Please note, however, that participants completed the online interview only four months following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, the impact of the virus strongly influenced responses, and it is possible that responses would have been different if life had been business-as-usual. The following discussion integrates findings with analyses that address each of the three research questions.

How does this group of urban Catholic school educators define "meaning" and "purpose" in their lives?

Respondents identified family, education in service of vocation, friends, faith, health, and social justice as the most significant factors in their lives, with the majority identifying family.

Family

This theme emerged as the most pervasive in members' responses, most likely due to effects of COVID-19, as all participants were living with family and in lock down. The importance of

family is indicative of social connectedness.⁵¹ As family is essentially one's first "community" and all but one respondent lived in a traditional family unit, this is no surprise. That the majority of these teachers were living at home due to pandemic restrictions renders stronger credence to the importance of family. Several cleaned and cooked for their families, shopped for groceries, and cared for siblings as family members worked full time. One teacher prioritized the health and well-being of family over everything else observing, "right now, their health and well-being is especially important to me because of the current pandemic. Some of my family are immunocompromised, and because I cannot imagine life without them, their safety is of the utmost importance." Several enjoyed a "close and loving relationship with each member of the family" with one affirming "I am who I am because of each of their unique gifts." In addition to taking graduate courses and caring for family, another "had been working at a local grocery store to help supplement [the] family's income, [but] now that classes have begun, I spend most of my days reading and studying." One teacher was also deeply concerned about an older lady in her neighborhood and assured daily that she was comfortable and safe at bedtime. For many of these teachers, caring for family, being with family, and concern for family served as a central, self-organizing construct that framed behavior, provided direction, and informed daily decision-making.⁵² Concern about the health and welfare of parents amid COVID-19 pervaded responses, and thus, these young adults supported family in a variety of ways.

Education in Service of Vocation

Education for most participants was essential to realizing vocation, as most did not look at teaching as a career but rather a calling to serve God or others. "The Church recognizes the need for Catholic educators to be professionally trained and holds a special place in her heart for those who choose the profession as their vocation...and supports professional certification processes and encourages contemporary pedagogy."⁵³ Honing pedagogy and interrogating social contexts, especially of urban schools, pervaded their graduate study. As part of UCTC, graduate students focused on improving culturally responsive pedagogy, understanding how the

social context of high-poverty, urban communities of traditionally excluded persons and Catholic social teachings should inform teaching and learning in their classrooms. Graduate study was essential to becoming effective teachers in the urban Catholic school context. Emmons notes that meaning in life comes from involvement in fulfilling goals that integrate into a coherent self-esteem and a broader social system that is socially accepted and supported.⁵⁴ The following reflection illustrates this type of meaning, an integration of the past, present, and future.

Focusing on grad school studies – self. It is important for me to focus on my grad studies at UCTC because I left my job to be a part of this amazing program. I made a short-term sacrifice with an aim toward a better future. These ideas primarily focus on the self and my own motivations for what drives me. The idea that I must clean up my own room before I can organize the world stands out to me. I must be able to care for myself and seek what I am called to do, before I can truly sort out the chaos of the real world or aid those around me. I have a selfish aim for the sake of going beyond the self later.

Reker and Wong define meaning as the "order, coherence and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment."⁵⁵ Most teachers observed that continuing their education was not only a critical step in becoming a teacher but also essential to fulfilling a call to "make a positive impact on the world and the future by teaching young students." Further discussion about vocation is addressed later in this paper.

Friends

Particularly salient for those who had just graduated from college, keeping in touch with friends was an important part of their daily routine. Friendship, writ large, is integral to developing lives of meaning and purpose. Many distinguished between casual and deep friendships. "I value friendship especially deep friendships. My friends are so important to me and my relationships with my friends are something that I greatly value and hope to

maintain throughout the remainder of my life.” According to Aristotle, friendship “makes attachment essential to the expression of virtue and living with friends a structural feature of good living.”⁵⁶ Grounded in Aristotle’s perception of friends as external goods, Sherman notes that “to have intimate friends and family is to have interwoven in one’s life, in a ubiquitous way, persons toward whom and with whom one can most fully and continuously express one’s goodness.”⁵⁷ One teacher echoed this sentiment, “My family and friends are important to me since they help me be a more caring, loving, and selfless person. With family and friendships comes love, sacrifice, and growth. My family and friends offer great love and support,” helping her express her unique goodness. Another teacher derived energy from “maintaining loving, lasting, and worthwhile relationships with my family, friends, and significant other. Relationships are a big part of my life. I find energy in being with other people and forming genuine connections with them.” What is leading a life of meaning and purpose if not expressing one’s goodness in service of others? Of course, friendship is also self-serving and instrumental but true friendship provides an authentic framework for dialogic thinking and reasoning while one is deep in the trenches of walking with others.

One member summed up feelings about family and friendship most articulately, honestly sharing that caring for loved ones is both selfish and selfless, and echoing Aristotle’s notion of the friendship of virtuous individuals.

When I am with loved ones it allows me to be my best self, one who enjoys others company but is able to care for them in the present moment. It is a relationship not centered on use and pragmatism. Things that are useless are goods in and of themselves. Just able to enjoy the relationships and bonds for what they are with no practical use in sight, that to me is a version of the transcendent and what gives life true meaning.

Faith

Spirituality, faith, and religiosity correlate significantly with resilience, grit, self-control, and

success.⁵⁸ Even in youngsters, high levels of faith and religiosity resulted in less depression and suicide ideation.⁵⁹ A majority of respondents identified faith as a critical factor impacting their daily lives and influencing their sense of meaning and purpose in life to “ground all things in faith and prayer” and “liv[e] God’s will daily and knowing and loving God in the process.” One teacher observed:

I have grown up Catholic my whole life and it has always been a major piece in my identity. Every day I try to find new ways to further my relationship through service, prayer, running, or spending time with loved ones. Whenever I am at my lowest of lows, highest of highs, and in the mundane/simple, I find peace when I turn to God for support and guidance. My life’s passion, education, came through learning how Jesus treats others.

Although most UCTC teachers are practicing Catholics and were educated in Catholic schools, several noted that living out their faith and living a holy life was challenging; yet living a holy life in service of others illustrates a life of meaning and purpose, which “brings eternal joy.”

This goal [of living a holy life] became important to me in 2018, when I realized the importance of following Jesus after going on a service trip. I am trying to develop a relationship with Jesus through prayer, reading my Bible, and living life as He did by being kind and helping others. It is not always easy to do this because sometimes it is easy to be selfish but I remember that being selfish only brings short term happiness and being holy brings eternal joy.

Worship, prayer, living in community, and critical reflection about practice and Catholic social teachings are critical components of the UCTC program. Cohort coursework is informed by tenets of Ignatian pedagogy, Catholic social teachings, and the Universal Apostolic Preferences. Students who apply to UCTC are in a sense self-selected and are accepted into UCTC strongly based on character recommendations that attest to moral decision-making, service to the

vulnerable, and commitment to Catholic social teachings. Also, many are graduates of faith-based, primarily Catholic institutions, which is consistent with Kuh, Hu, and Vesper's observation that religiosity and sense of purpose are dominant at faith-based universities and that Denominational Liberal Arts universities significantly shape the values of the students they serve.⁶⁰

Health

Physical and mental health emerged as a significant, important factor in these teachers' lives. Of particular importance was the issue of self-care as a way to sustain resilience and well-being. While life of meaning and purpose contributes significantly to personal well-being and satisfaction, one cannot effectively serve others if physically or emotionally unwell.⁶¹ As one teacher noted: "I am investing a lot of time and money into improving my mental health. I am not able to fulfill my other roles if this aspect is not satisfactory." Several teachers articulated the importance of self-care not only in the midst of the virus, but also in self-preparation for serving students, families, and communities in contexts they perceived to be exhausting and demanding. This focus on good health and self-care permeated many reflections.

Health is also very important to me because in my opinion it is the thing that I guess is most likely to hurt or take away the ones I love most. I think that also during this pandemic I have realized how important it is to me that my family stays healthy and that we as a society work to protect our most vulnerable from sickness and disease. I also think that mental health is extremely important to me because it can impact every other aspect of our lives. As teachers we work to help fill the cups of our students both academically and social-emotionally and as the saying goes, "you cannot pour from an empty cup." It is something that I have learned to prioritize throughout my life, especially this last year of being a first-year teacher and living in a large community.

Social Justice

Teachers viewed issues of social justice such as educational inequity, systematic racism, poverty, lack of inclusive education, and criminal justice as important to their life and work. While it makes sense that persons pursuing a program such as UCTC are committed to enacting a social justice mission, the socio-political climate in combination with the serious impact of COVID-19 magnified these issues placing them front and center, especially educational inequity.⁶² Observing how her "education had contributed to inter- and intra-personal growth," a teacher shared,

Learning cannot only happen individually but also in community... I believe education is right all should have, and I am thankful for what I have acquired. I hope I can serve diverse students so that they can practice that right. Education is not something I take for granted. I consider it part of my life mission to grant education equity by teaching diverse students and continuously learning how to become a better teacher.

Teachers also identified racial injustice as a significant issue to be addressed in the world, one they address in their teaching. As one teacher observed, "I am constantly sickened by the institutionalized oppression of people of color, and with my role as a white teacher, I take it upon myself to be informed on this issue." Several teachers used teaching as a mission of hope and responsibility to "give [students] the tools they will need to hopefully dismantle the system." Almost all were cognizant of white privilege, noting that teaching is a platform to work for the disenfranchised and marginalized and their obligation to live as allies. Almost all noted that

ignoring the cries of underprivileged populations is the greatest threat to humanity... If we continue to ignore racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all other societal evils, then we will collapse as a society. I am aware that it is highly unlikely that these prejudices will be eliminated completely in my lifetime, but we can still strive to create systems of

equity and abolish parts of systems that contribute to systemic injustices.

How teachers address factors of family, education, faith, friends, health, and social justice illustrates intention, motivation, and direction and a genuine belief that their course of action will serve and cooperate in the work of Jesus Christ. Daily activities supported family health and welfare as well as personal resilience. These illustrated the importance of family as a “first community” and personal health and well-being to relate to the caring for others. Application to and subsequent participation in UCTC reflects the goal of walking with the poor and marginalized and accompanying youth on the journey to create a future filled with hope, opportunity, and justice in the context of urban Catholic education. Participation also requires a series of tasks essential to realizing this goal: completing graduate work, living in quarantine/community, learning to teach in cyberspace, living and modeling Catholic social teachings in the context of teaching and learning, strengthening faith and religiosity, and caring for the whole person in their daily work with children and families. These are the elements of leading a life of meaning and purpose!

How do these educators perceive the relationship between a life of meaning and purpose and vocation?

Intentionality of purpose is often equated with vocation, as vocation gives purpose.⁶³ In viewing teaching as vocation, teaching may be “a calling grounded within a religious worldview, as coming from God and forming part of a divine plan for one’s particular life” but may also “be grounded in a humanistic worldview, in which a call to teach can be understood to originate from those in need of teaching services.”⁶⁴ Damon, Menon, and Bronk regard purpose as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.⁶⁵ Thus, purpose is a far-reaching and stable goal that has genuine implications beyond-the-self and offers constant and consistent direction. Whether hearing God’s call or hearing the needs of others, teachers in this study regarded teaching as vocation rather than a career. In either case, purpose was manifested in actions and goals that went beyond-the-self.⁶⁶

Hearing God’s Call

Many of our teachers strongly regarded teaching as a calling, noting that the decision was something they always knew they were destined to do.

I’ve always known that I wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember. I did not know why until high school though. I was on a mission trip one summer and I had some sort of revelation. I clearly saw that I love helping others and seeing how my actions can make someone else’s life better... I grew up around educators and nurses, so I’ve seen firsthand how they impacted peoples’ lives. I knew I was meant to do more than just make money as an adult. I was meant to help kids become the strong citizens they are meant to be and to encourage them to be life-long learners.

Several teachers shared that having attended Catholic school contributed to “who I am today and that [teaching] is my plan that God has laid out. I try to remain faithful during the hardest of times.” One teacher attributed her decision to hear the call from “witnessing people who strongly lived the convictions of the faith. This conviction, and the relationships I formed with people, caused me to question and dive deeper into such beliefs. I considered such a journey to have been prompted by God.” Another noted that having grown up in the Catholic faith, “I have always found comfort in my relationship with God. I know He has a path for me to follow in this world.” Still another viewed teaching as “living God’s will daily, and knowing and loving God in the process.” The need to serve Jesus and cooperate in the work of Jesus, pervaded their decision-making. These reflections emphasize the “God-given” and divinely inspired nature of vocation and purpose in life.⁶⁷ Several teachers explicitly equated purpose and discerned vocation.

I think the phrase “purpose in life” means my ultimate goal, and what I hope to accomplish in my time here. Yes, I absolutely believe I have a purpose in life. My purpose is to use this time on earth to figure out what path God has laid for me,

and to follow it. My purpose is to find ultimate happiness here and beyond by doing my best to the people around me. My purpose is to have everyone in my life know that I am a Child of God, and that they are too, by my words and actions and the way I treat people.

The foundation of this “God-given” purpose for many of the teachers was a deep and meaningful relationship with God. As one noted, “My relationship with God impacts my everyday life—in how I think, treat others, what I strive for, etc.” This relationship with God has supported their discerned vocation and provides regular direction in how they carry out this vocation. It also provides these individuals with strength to move forward when confronted with challenge: “Whenever I am at my lowest of lows, highest of highs, and in the mundane/simple, I find peace when I turn to God for support and guidance.” This invitation of God into their process of making decisions and living their lives in meaningful ways bears witness to the strength offered by the first of the UAPs and as Pope Francis notes, this relationship with God allows for fruitful engagement of the other Universal Apostolic Preferences.⁶⁸

Hearing the Needs of Others

Others chose teaching because prior experiences had refined their desire to meet the needs of others. “I think that reaching and teaching children is the best way to leave humanity ‘better than we found it.’” A pervasive theme was the value of inclusion and inclusive pedagogy in the classroom: “important to me are those students or people who have disabilities that affect their everyday lives. It is a problem that they struggle to get the education that they deserve.” One teacher noted the importance of advocating for her special education students in the general education setting, noting that her students “deserve to be part of a larger classroom community and the school community. Teachers will try and push back and claim that my students are too disruptive in their rooms, but it is about the experiences they gain that truly impact their educational.”

Another teacher believed that happiness was realized in pursuing a vocation that made one

“feel fulfilled” and allowed her to be there for “family and friends whether it’s physically, emotionally and/or spiritually.” She observed that completing her senior year of college during COVID-19, graduating from college, moving out of her childhood home, and parents’ divorce contributed to “such a crazy time with a lot of changes” and that “being good at teaching” required “being happy with what you are doing and happy with yourself.” Teaching was a means to not only personal fulfillment but also to effectively navigating life’s critical events and challenges and supporting others. Overall UCTC members viewed teaching as a means to address the needs of the world, and in service of this purpose, selected a program (UCTC) that enculturated teaching as vocation, that strongly resonated with Christian values (worship, prayer, living in community), and that provided daily challenges to their commitment to leading a life of meaning and purpose (teaching in an urban Catholic context that serves traditionally excluded and marginalized students, families, and communities).

Teaching as Evangelism

Although not all participants were raised in the Catholic faith, they pledged to model the characteristics of Catholic identity and Catholic schools. Teaching as vocation especially in urban Catholic schools fully manifests those characteristics that define Catholic identity and Catholic schools. That these teachers are committed to and view educational activity as ministry and mission, they are in a sense, evangelists, fostering “in every aspect of programs, life, and activities... personal relationship with Jesus Christ and communal witness to the Gospel message of love of God and neighbor and service to the world, especially the poor and marginalized.”⁶⁹ Committed to teaching the whole child, they contribute to forming “the spiritual, intellectual, physical, psychological, social, moral, aesthetic and religious capacities of each child.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, teaching is a communal activity, involving students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the congregation. The neighborhood as school is an educational community of persons and a genuine community of faith requiring that teachers are accessible to all members of the communities they serve: “an

educational community of persons and a genuine community of faith.”⁷¹

How does vocation call these educators to enact the Universal Apostolic Preferences?

Walking with the Excluded

By virtue of their discerned vocation and their Jesuit formation, urban Catholic school teachers are called to enact the Universal Apostolic Preferences in their daily lives as teachers and colleagues, as UCTC members living, worshiping, and praying in community, through advocating for the students, families, and neighborhoods they serve. Pervasive among these teachers was the belief that “My most important goal in life is to have made positive change for those I teach and serve.” The work of teaching in a context inhabited by the traditionally excluded and vulnerable demands a spark that enlightens, warms, kindles, and ignites passion not only for learning but also, and more importantly, for fostering justice and an ethic of care.⁷² As one teacher noted “I want to be a light for my students to guide them to a better life.”

Teachers were acutely cognizant of the struggles many vulnerable students experienced in classrooms, which motivated them to join others to serve the excluded. “Equal access to education is a problem that is important to me. I saw students go to non-resourced schools with not even a notebook to use. It is hard to watch and truly unfair that these students are not given equal opportunities in this world... it is essential that I work to change this unfairness.” Focusing on “becoming the best teacher I can be” one teacher “threw [herself] into professional development and other courses... and enlisted the feedback of students and their families to have an accurate understanding of what is working and what needs to change.” She pursued intentional listening, hearing the dissonance and uncertainty, taking the perspectives of the excluded in order to change the unfairness.⁷³ Still another viewed education as “evangelization with God’s grace, about the faith, in informal and formal settings.” Her current goal involved studying and learning how “to become a social justice, culturally-aware educator.” One teacher viewed the program as a way to achieve

her goal of being a “teacher who is always learning” and observed that “this goal will push me to always find ways to be a teacher of equity and empathy.”

Prior experiences influenced this call to serve the excluded. Working with the homeless during the summer, one teacher “was able to immerse [herself] in the community and serve individuals experiencing homelessness but more importantly was able to learn about the topic and what I can do to help and spread awareness when I returned back to my undergraduate campus after the experience was over.” Another teacher attributed her passion for serving persons with special needs to a summer camp experience, which challenged and transformed her thinking about this often-excluded population.

I was not educated or did not know how to interact [with persons with severe special needs]. I think this experience allowed me to realize that this population deserves the same respect, education and participation in the world. I find that people might not want to interact or hire people with disabilities because they might not know how to interact with or help this group of people. Helping myself and others to do this can begin in the classroom.

These teachers feel compassion for those they serve, acknowledge the inequity, and work to eliminate it, wanting to “make sure that whenever I leave a situation that I have positively helped one person and if I am in a situation where I do not feel that way I will try to make sure I do something intentionally to make that happen.” These educators found teaching as a “hopeful response in [the] context of fragile human ties.”⁷⁴

Journeying with Youth to Create a Hope-filled Future

The incredible inequities that plague our urban students and families make me sick and have inspired me to work for this change. Inequitable access to quality education, inequitable housing, racism, segregation, the list goes on and on. It is important to me as a Child of God, a

Catholic, and a fellow citizen of the United States. We as a nation, a faith, a community are only as strong as our most vulnerable members. I believe that in each of these identities it is my duty to work until all members of our community are valued and respected. I have had the chance to impact the problem on a small scale with my choice of profession. I have chosen to work in Urban Catholic Education. I believe that urban students are entitled to a high-quality education as well, and I want to do my part, however small, to help bring that education to them. I have constantly challenged myself, my beliefs, and my pedagogy to ensure that I am always bringing the best of myself to these children. They deserve from me to be the best teacher for them that I can, and that is what I have tried to do.

These teachers are profoundly cognizant of the educational inequity that pervades urban schools and seized the opportunity to work in urban Catholic schools. As this teacher observes, it is her duty and responsibility to bring her “better self” to the classroom. Purposeful and meaningful, the most “important goal in life is to be an effective teacher that can meet the needs of all of my students. I want to provide my students with multimodal ways of learning that are provided in the least restrictive environment for them. I want to learn more about the field of education and how I can extend my thinking to better be an advocate and teacher.”

The vocation of teaching in urban Catholic schools demands that educators not only become better versions of self but that the educator also works to support others in their journey to become better versions of self. This can only be accomplished by caring for the whole person or *cura personalis*, which grounds teaching and learning in Ignatian pedagogy. Understanding, appreciating, affirming, and meeting the social, emotional, economic, academic, biological, and spiritual needs of the person is essential to enabling one to live a full, purposeful, and meaningful life. Thus, an educator must *know* the child, the family, the neighborhood, the community, the school, colleagues, and leadership

in order to act in solidarity. Working together in collaborative communities of inquiry and practice improves such knowing which is essential to improving teaching and learning. UCTC provides the space for such inquiry in the schools in which teachers serve, in community where they live and worship, in the mentoring, professional development, and coaching they receive, and in graduate coursework informed by Ignatian pedagogy.

Discussion

Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen prophesy the demise of effective public education, urging significant change.⁷⁵ Their framework identifies character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking as essential elements of deep learning as these elements encompass empathy, social-emotional learning, entrepreneurialism, and related skills. In the “heaven” of their framework deep learning attacks inequity, engages the world to change the world, involves a critical mass of others, is personal and collective, and enables young people to make older people better. Such elements clearly resonate with the mission of Catholic schools, Catholic social teachings, the Universal Apostolic Preferences, and Catholic identity which “make our Catholic elementary and secondary schools ‘schools for the human person’ and allow them to fill a critical role in the future life of our Church, our country and our world.”⁷⁶ In fact, “the Ottawa Catholic Schools are praised for making this kind of deep learning the norm for all schools and classrooms by choosing to embrace the deep learning agenda and using the coherence framework to craft a whole system strategy for change.”⁷⁷ Naturally, Catholic school educators are critical to Ottawa’s success, as they are facilitators of deep learning: learning that attacks inequity and engages students to change the world enabling teachers, students, and communities to become better versions of themselves.

The need for carefully prepared urban Catholic teachers is even more pressing, however, given sociocultural changes and challenges. Franchi and Rymarz note that “the wider culture can no longer be assumed to be supportive or even familiar with religious principles and ideals.”⁷⁸ That teachers are cognizant that potential students bring beliefs and

positionalities that are reflective of wider culture is critical to the efficacy and longevity of Catholic school education. Essentially,

teachers are at the heart of [Catholic schools'] educational mission and must not only bring religious and secular knowledge to the classroom but also possess pedagogy and dispositions that are compatible with contemporary contexts. Catholic teachers should be professionally competent with lifelong formation processes that recognize the centrality of 'the teacher' to the Catholic school."⁷⁹

Competent Catholic school educators manifest religious and secular knowledge and pedagogy.

Furthermore, journeying with youth requires novice and experienced teachers to deconstruct assumptions about all forms of diversity in order to listen authentically to what students are saying or not saying, and to hear and respond to the needs and challenges of the "wider culture."⁸⁰ As previously noted, one teacher reached out to students and families engaging them in dialogue about needs and wants. Change must be grounded in authentic dialogue. Urban Catholic school educators work with diverse populations from low-income families. The majority are students of color who represent a range of ethnicities, multiple languages and cultures, and academic preparation. Each child's narrative is different and requires responses unique to the child and family; attending to the whole child demands powerful attention and understanding and is prerequisite to the journey. Teachers as facilitators and participants in these conversations critically reflect about these conversations and act to refine and improve discussion. Father Greg Boyle, S.J. of Homeboy Industries observes that "Kids need heat and light to survive. Heat, in the respectful, dignified vigilance over them. Light, in the form of hope for some kind of future beyond this."⁸¹ Dialogical encounters respect the dignity, value, worth, culture, abilities, talents, and experiences of participants, as these conversations clarify values, beliefs, needs, goals, and desires and establish contexts for imagining and planning for a better life and future. The ultimate goal as one teacher remarked "is to enact even larger-scaled change."

Our teachers' reflections strongly suggest that teaching as discerned vocation, especially in urban Catholic schools, provides a far-reaching space for enacting the Universal Apostolic Preferences, especially when they have been formed in a program viewing their work through the window of the UAPs. These servants, grounded in supportive family and friends, inspired by faith and learning, and committed to acting against social injustice in the classroom, teachers, called by and in relationship with God, hone and refine their mission to journey with students, families, communities, and colleagues. They develop and steward the skills, processes, dispositions, and actions essential to creating a future of hope, equity, and healing for all, especially the excluded. As Franchi and Rymarz urge, these teachers are becoming competent and compassionate educators, who understand the social contexts of urban schools and the wider culture and who strive to make a difference "especially in the lives of the smallest."⁸² Their actions foster and sustain a mission to become better versions of themselves. Caring for the whole child, they understand how the intersection of race, culture, language, talent, socioeconomic status, and epistemology in the context of overwhelming mechanisms of injustice creates complexity that challenges them to persist in developing professionally and spiritually in order to "live a holy life" and express their goodness. Essentially these teachers are taking up the work to challenge the status quo through modeling moral responsibility for those they serve. Vocation in this challenging context brings purpose and meaning to their lives and establishes a critical space for nurturing meaning and purpose in others.

Conclusion

Interpreting *magis* as "becoming" Mescher asks: "Is God the center of my life? What kind of person am I growing into? What kind of community are we building?"⁸³ Our novice teachers' reflections echo a belief that they "are called to repair a world broken by despair, division, and injustice."⁸⁴ Vocational discernment and program support have led them to this space—a place replete with struggles, interruption, anger, pain, fulfillment, and joy, a place where

family, friends, education, faith, and justice inspire and sustain resilience and persistence. In many ways, these teachers are virtuous in that their behaviors and beliefs demonstrate “feeling, desire, emotion, perception, reason, judgement, self-determination, will, action and motivation,”⁸⁵ which are prerequisites to acting virtuously. Perceiving educational inequity, empathizing with the marginalized, reasoning that injustice is wrong, desiring and determining that action must be taken, and planning and pursuing action to right injustice are essential to living virtues of faith, hope, charity, compassion, altruism, prudence, etc. They have entered a space that demands perspective-taking, dialogical thinking, reasoning, and communication, and commitment to

living for fostering agreement and accountability as we live into the vision of

who we are, who we strive to become, and the kind of society we hope to build—one marked by love, mercy, justice, solidarity, and hope—in order to promote the flourishing of all creation.⁸⁶

If these teachers persist through education, worship, prayer, and faith in living this commitment in the contexts of classroom, instruction, and collaboration with community, this space is far-reaching as everything they touch can potentially achieve the work and the mission of the UAPs. Not all of us can actually walk with the poor like Jesus Christ, but we can educate ourselves and others to become better selves to cooperate in the work of Jesus Christ, which can achieve common good for our common humanity in our common home. HJE

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