Feed My Sheep: A Framework for Lay Educator Faith Formation in Catholic Schools

Ronald D. Fussell Ed.D.
Creighton University

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Abstract: In this grounded theory study, qualitative data from 11 educators in six diocesan high schools in the New England region revealed an interrelated framework for lay educator faith formation. Dimensions of that framework include the educator's relationship to the Church, interconnected processes of prayerful reflection and personal encounter, formative experiences with the lives of students, and formation in service as an outward expression of Catholic school identity. Participants also identified how occurrences of disruptive transitions and crises can unite and galvanize Catholic school communities in support of a common faith. By understanding how these dimensions relate to one another, Catholic school leaders can develop intentional and engaging faith formation efforts that lead to faithfully authentic Catholic school communities that more accurately reflect Gospel values and provide a setting where students can encounter the risen Christ.

Keywords: professional faith formation, reflective practice, collaboration, service, student engagement

Catholic schools in the United States, collectively referred to as the nation's second school system (Walch, 2003), have arrived at a crossroads concerning Catholic identity. Whereas in past decades, the majority of educators in Catholic schools were women and men religious, which allowed the school's Catholic identity to be assumed (Miller, 2006), this is no longer the case. A recent national survey of Catholic schools revealed that 2.6% of Catholic school educators were women and men religious, and 97.4% were lay educators (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). Now that lay educators have emerged as the primary professional stakeholders in Catholic schools, it is important to consider that their faith formation is different from that of

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1   Creighton University

women and men religious, and often is not emphasized to the same extent as their professional skills (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014). The Catholic Church considers the preservation of Catholic school identity to be crucial, and the extent to which this occurs depends primarily upon the educators in Catholic schools (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977).

Lay educators in Catholic schools assume an essential role in establishing the authentic Catholic ethos of the Catholic school community. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) elaborates on this, noting that Catholic school educators take on a vocation that bears a direct connection to the universal mission of the Catholic Church. For educators to fully live out this vocation, they require appropriate formation, both professionally and spiritually.

Catholic school leaders bear a great deal of responsibility for the formation of educators (Cho, 2012; Earl, 2005; Spezia, 2016). According to the National Standards and Benchmarks of Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012), effective Catholic school leaders provide retreats and other spiritual experiences, access to service programs, and more generally, are intentional about supporting the faith life of the school community. It is stated within the NSBECS that "an excellent Catholic school adhering to mission provides opportunities for adult faith formation and action in service of social justice" (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012, p. 6). Put simply, the Catholic school leader is responsible to make sure that "education is a shared and living mission" among the educators in the school community (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014, §1.b.).

Given the importance of lay educator faith formation and the leader's role in providing it in Catholic schools, this study was guided by an overarching research question: How can Catholic secondary school leaders provide formation experiences for lay educators that will prepare them to promote the identity of the Catholic schools in which they work? This study will propose a research-based framework for lay educator faith formation that makes explicit the requisite dimensions of a comprehensive and effective school-wide faith formation effort.

Review of Literature

Catholic schools are consistently defined as a vital component in the evangelizing and salvific mission of the Catholic Church, (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, 1997, 2014; Miller, 2006; Paul VI, 1965; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1982). The role of the educator in a Catholic school is understood to be essential in the school's ability to meet this aim. Post-conciliar Vatican documents have affirmed the essence of educator faith formation and the authentic faith witness that educators provide in a Catholic school setting (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, 1997, 2007, 2014; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1982). Scholars, in turn, have confirmed and expanded upon practical approaches to lay educator formation in Catholic school communities (Cho, 2012; Cook, 2015; Cook & Simonds, 2011;

Shimabukuro, 1998). Careful examination of such sources reveals vital interrelated dimensions that support and promote lay educator faith formation.

Doctrinal Perspectives on Catholic School Educator Formation

Catholic school educators are called to illuminate truth with the light of faith (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). It stands to reason then that lay educator faith formation should be included with other areas of professional formation (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982). Moreover, the process of educator formation should be continuous, and not one that terminates at the end of teacher preparation programs (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). The absence of well-formed educators places a school's Catholic identity at risk. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) warned of the possibility of a population of Catholic educators who lack consistent formation, thus compromising their ability to wholly support the educational project of the Catholic Church.

The Congregation for Catholic Education (2014) recently addressed contemporary challenges in Catholic education in the Vatican document *Educating Today and Tomorrow, A Renewing Passion*. Lay educator faith formation was included as one of the challenges. The Congregation for Catholic Education (2014) also addressed the role of school leaders, noting that because Catholic school heads are accountable to their bishop, proper attention must be given to their formation in faith. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) connected leadership to its discussion of lay educator formation, stating that "the preparation and ongoing formation of new administrators and teachers are vital if our schools are to remain truly Catholic in all aspects of school life" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, p. 10). Central to formation efforts is the availability of ongoing faith formation and professional development programs for administrators and Catholic school educators alike (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). Archbishop Miller (2006) summarized that if students are to experience the full beauty of the Church, every effort should be made to ensure that Catholic school educators and leaders provide the necessary faith witness and formative experiences that will lead to an authentic, faithful Catholic school community.

Achieving the aims of adult faith formation requires a nuanced understanding of the characteristics of well-formed adults. The United States Catholic Conference (1999) proposes three dimensions: *living faith*, *explicit faith*, and *fruitful faith*. Living faith, which includes an understanding that faith is in a constant state of growth, inspires a greater commitment to put God's gifts to work in service to justice. Explicit faith connects to the "life, teaching, and mission of the Church" (United States Catholic Conference, 1999, p. 18), providing for authentic faith witness. This leads to fruitful faith, which calls the faithful to put their gifts to the service of those who need it most. When considered in terms of its cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, the synthesis

of these areas is required to make faith a "lived reality" (Cho, 2012, p. 120). In the context of a school faith community, a well-formed Catholic school educator is one who understands the organic nature of his or her faith development, grounds that development in a personal relationship with Jesus and provides authentic witness to students, families, and colleagues, and is intentional about engaging in authentic Christian service in support of the poor and marginalized.

The Importance of Educator Commitment and Catholic School Identity

Archbishop Miller (2006) argued the importance of recruiting and retaining educators who are fully committed to the educational project of the Catholic Church. This theme of commitment and its connection to educator formation is well-examined in Magisterial documents on Catholic education. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) was deliberate in calling attention to the spiritual dimension of educator commitment, stating that "to commit oneself to working in accordance with the aims of a Catholic School is to make a great act of faith" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education , 1977, §83). The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) reaffirmed the importance of lay educator commitment, this time connecting the idea of commitment with the formation of students to be prepared to build a just world. In this sense, the authors framed commitment as a vocation rather than a profession and asserted that a fully committed lay Catholic educator becomes a "living mirror" (§52) through which the student encounters the risen Christ. One important dimension to commitment in Catholic education is that it is an apostolic act requiring not only cultural and spiritual formation, but intentional direction that leads to building a faithful community both within and beyond the schoolhouse walls (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2007).

Drawing upon relevant Vatican documents as well as theoretical perspectives on organizational commitment, Cho (2012) examined the relationship between a Catholic school educator's faith and his or her commitment to Catholic education. Cho operationalized his definition of commitment as an educator's "strong acceptance and participation in the evangelizing mission of their school, a willingness to appear as a witness to faith by word and deed, and dedication to help students develop Christian beliefs and values" (2012, pp. 121-122). While many factors can affect an educator's commitment to a Catholic school, faith must be considered as a central factor. Moreover, the evidence in this study led Cho (2012) to draw attention to the need for careful examination of the effectiveness of secondary school educator faith formation programs, noting that these programs often do not yield their intended results.

Cho's (2012) findings were echoed in Convey's (2014) study of motivation and job satisfaction of Catholic school educators. In this study of 716 Catholic school educators in three dioceses, (Convey, 2014) found that while a school's academic philosophy and environment were important motivators for Catholic school educators, ministerial considerations emerged as the strongest predictors of

internal satisfaction. This internal satisfaction was found to lead to more substantial commitment to a Catholic school's mission. Regarding practical implication, Catholic school educators who are committed to their schools are drawn not just to the name of the school or its diocesan/parish affiliation, but also to the collective efforts of educators and leaders to foster awareness and understanding of the school's mission and Catholic identity.

Faith Formation as a Community Effort

Church authorities have stressed the importance of the Catholic school community in a Catholic educator's professional faith formation experience. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education stated that "Christian faith, in fact, is born and grows inside a community" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, §53). This notion of community has been further defined by Church authorities to include students, parents, and educators (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Moreover, the theme of community should be inclusive of the Church, the greater community, and society as a whole, as a People of God (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982). Miller (2006) summarized that Catholic school educator faith formation is not solely within the purview of a Catholic school community, and that the role of the broader ecclesial community must not be overlooked.

Noting a lack of a concrete and consistent framework in ecclesial documents, Cook & Simonds (2011) applied the theme of relationships as an organizing principle for conceptualizing Catholic school identity. They identified from post-conciliar Vatican documents a framework with five levels of relationships—self, God, others, communities, and creation—all leading to the preparation of students to evaluate culture critically. This, in turn, prepares students to build meaningful relationships in the world.

While the focus of Cook & Simonds (2011) study centered on student relationships, the authors called attention to the importance of adult educators in the formation of students. The relationship between students and educators is a dynamic exchange, where they "come together and explore life in a unique setting that embraces the spiritual part of reality as a way to fully understand the human situation in the world" (p. 323). Educators are therefore called to enter into a process of spiritual formation to bring this model to fruition.

In a thorough examination of Church documents related to Catholic education, Shimabukuro (1998) developed a reflective formation tool for individual educators. Among other prevailing themes, Shimabukuro identified community-building as an essential dimension, claiming that formation is a communal effort and that educators need to be invested in building community. In all, Shimabukuro concluded that it is through community-building that an educator acquires his or her professional identity and thus is an important element of a Catholic school educator's ministerial call.

Figure 1

Framework for the Renewal of Catholic Schools (Cook & Simonds, 2011)
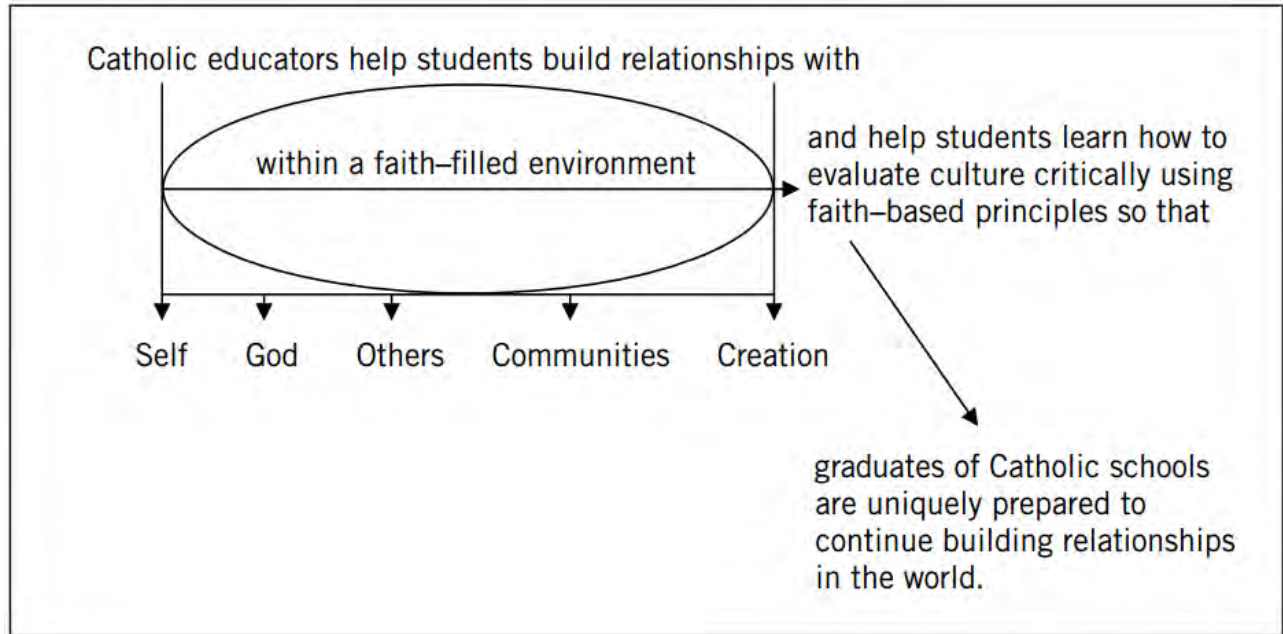
Addressing Catholic identity through the lens of charism, Cook (2015) identified several dimensions for Catholic school leaders to address in working toward a distinctive Catholic school identity. One such dimension was the enculturation and formation of community members. Regarding faculty formation, Cook highlighted the need for orientation and induction strategies that emphasize ongoing formation. Individual reflection and community building are among the effective, interrelated dimensions of a school faculty faith enculturation and formation effort. Cook also noted the importance of authentic personal witness in Catholic school leadership, offering that Catholic school leaders ought to be deliberate in connecting their own faith lives with their outward behaviors in the school community.

Method

To address the overarching research question of this study, I applied an inductive, grounded theory approach to acquiring, analyzing, and coding data. Creswell (2009) defines grounded theory methodology as "a qualitative strategy in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study" (p. 13). The design of this study involved qualitative analysis of participant responses to determine how lay educator faith formation unfolds in the school setting.

Data provided by participants were interpreted through a three-stage process that included open, focused, and theoretical coding. Additionally, memo-writing, a staple of grounded theory research Charmaz (2006), served as a useful process to distill vast amounts of data into various codes and categories. Memo-writing encourages the researcher to analyze data and codes early in the analytical process, and it is a means to document emergent patterns and trends (Charmaz, 2006). Through concurrent processes of coding and memo-writing, I sought to understand relationships between emergent codes and categories, and this understanding formed the basis for the development of a framework for faith formation for lay educators in diocesan Catholic secondary schools.

Participants

Creswell (2009) and Seidman (2013) recommended the purposeful selection of participants for a qualitative research study. Seidman (2013) further asserted that while the selection of participants should be fair to the general population, it is advisable to apply a sampling strategy that is representative of the specific population studied. With these factors in mind, I initially sought a representative sample of participants from Catholic diocesan secondary schools in the New England region. Participants varied in subject areas taught and in longevity. Sites selected were from urban, suburban, and rural areas. Institutional review board approval from the university with which I am affiliated ensured appropriate and ethical engagement with all human subjects.

As Cho (2012) suggested, not much is known about the effectiveness of existing secondary school lay educator faith formation programs. Moreover, the formation needs of Catholic secondary school educators warrant special attention, given that in many cases, secondary school educators are specialists who teach in narrow content areas for which intersections with spiritual themes are more abstract. To address these needs, participants for this study were selected from Catholic secondary schools.

It was also important that participants for this study were sought from schools that have demonstrated success in establishing and maintaining Catholic school mission and identity. In the New England region, Catholic secondary schools are evaluated every 10 years by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges [NEASC]. The NEASC school accreditation process involves a structured review of a school's mission and the extent to which the school's policies, culture, and decision-making processes align with the stated mission (*Handbook for visiting committee members (2012 ed.)* (2014). Schools are initially evaluated by a team comprised of school leaders and educators from similar schools, and final decisions on school accreditation are made by the NEASC Commission on Independent Schools. For this study, superintendents of participating (arch)dioceses identified schools that had achieved the highest possible rating in the area of school mission in their most recent accreditation evaluation at the time of the study. It was from those schools that participants were sought.

Table 1

Overview of Diocesan and School Participation

State	Participating Arch/diocese	Participating Schools	Participants
Connecticut	1	1	2
Maine [a]	0	0	0
Massachusetts	1	3	5
New Hampshire [b]	0	0	0
Vermont	1	2	4
Rhode Island	0	0	0
Total	3	6	11

[a] Private secondary schools in the Diocese of Portland (ME) are not required to be accredited and thus were not eligible for this study.

[b] This study deliberately excluded schools in the Diocese of Manchester (NH) due to my supervisory responsibilities there.

Upon requesting and receiving authorization from heads of schools to recruit participants, those heads of schools forwarded, on my behalf, an invitation for educators in the school to participate in this study. Specifically, I sought to develop a participant pool that included educators of various content areas, other than theology, whose collective experiences and backgrounds were diverse. Interested educators completed a brief questionnaire for general stratification that was used to ensure a representative sample:

Procedure

The development of the interview protocol centered on faith formation themes of reflection and community encounter that were identified to be prevalent in the literature review (Cook, 2015; Cook & Simonds, 2011; Miller, 2006; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; Shimabukuro, 1998). Data were acquired from lay educators in Catholic secondary schools in the New England region using a structured interview protocol that consisted of seven open-ended prompts:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and how you arrived at your current ministry.

2. Take me back to a time when you felt that you grew in your faith in an experience provided by your school. Describe that experience for me.

3. Tell me about how your faith formation in this school occurs within the context of the school community.

4. What is the role of personal reflection in your faith formation in this community?

5. How has collaboration with your peers impacted your professional faith formation?

6. Do you grow in your faith more in personal reflection or in collaboration with your colleagues? Why?

7. What is the role of your school's leadership in providing for your faith formation?

Participant interviews occurred between September 2015 and January 2016. Interviews occurred in the participants' schools in a private location of the participant's choosing. The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes. I applied appropriate protocols to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and I maintained an audit trail throughout the coding process. Interview transcriptions were shared with the

Table 2

Overview of Participants

Characteristic	Number of Participants
	n = 11
Gender	
Male	6
Female	5
Average Experience in Education (in years)	
40+ Years	3
30 – 39 Years	1
20 – 29 Years	4
10 – 19 Years	2
0 – 9 Years	1
Average Experience in Catholic Education (in years)	
40+ Years	1
30 – 39 Years	3
20 – 29 Years	2
10 – 19 Years	2
Primary Ministry	
Classroom Teacher	8
School Counselor	1
School Administrator	2
Faith Practice [a]	
Catholic	10
Non-Catholic	1

[a] All participants who identified themselves as Catholic identified themselves as practicing Catholics. The participant who identified as non-Catholic identified as a member of a Protestant denomination.

participants before coding to ensure accuracy. Finally, I conferenced with colleagues regarding research memos and the interpretation of data to ensure the validity of the overall findings.

Findings

Interviews with all 11 participants yielded 2,652 discrete data points and 544 initial codes. Codes that that emerged among three or more participants in more than one school were determined to be significant and were organized into representative categories:

Table 3

Focused Categories and Triangulated Codes [a]

Category	Cases Coded n = 11	Schools Coded n = 6
Christ, His Church, and the Educator's Relationship to It		
Affinity for Eucharist and Liturgy	8	4
Personal Faith and Professional Faith Inseparable	5	3
Jesus as Model	4	4
Importance of Educator Faith Witness	4	4
Reflective Practice to Draw from the Well of Personal Experience		
Making Time for Reflective Practice	6	4
Reflection Leading to Collaboration	5	3
A Preference for Reflection	5	3
Prayerful Reflection Occurs in the Context of Work	3	2
Encountering Others on the Path to Formation		
Formation through an Encounter with Another	8	6
Community Dialogue Leads to Formation	5	2
Collaboration Occurs Informally	3	3
Collaboration and Reflection as Connected Processes	3	2
Connecting Formation to the Experience of the Students		
Acknowledging Students as Central Concern	8	4
Connecting Classroom Instruction and Formation	8	6
Student Experience Leads to Adult Formation	7	5
Encountering Students Outside of the Classroom	4	4

Table 3 continued		
Formation in Service as an Outward Expression of School Identity		
Educator and Students Serving Together	7	5
Service Grounded in Faith	7	4
Stressing Service as Central to School Identity	6	3
Managing Transition and Crisis		
Growing in Faith through Crisis	8	6
Community Outreach toward Colleagues in Crisis	5	4
Growing through Transition	3	2

[a]Codes that were not triangulated by three or more participants in two or more schools were omitted from this table.

Discussion

Many participants in this study intentionally identified the importance of their relationship with Christ and His Church as a crucial dimension of their professional faith formation. This relationship, often with their parish or local church, formed the foundation for all other considerations about their faith formation. Building upon that, participants discussed the formative influence of opportunities for both personal reflection and encounter with others. While participants differed on their preference of one over the other as a structured form of faith formation, they did agree that both are necessary and complementary of each other. Participants acknowledged the centrality of how they connect with the experiences with students, within and outside of the classroom, and they affirmed the importance of faithful community service, especially with students, as an intentional approach to building the Kingdom of God on Earth. These experiences added to the well of personal experience and served to inform future opportunities for reflection and encounter. Finally, it emerged that when leaders are thoughtful about their approach, moments of transition and crisis can be formative for all members of the school community.

Christ, His Church, and the Educator's Relationship to Them

When asked about their experiences in professional faith formation for a Catholic school ministry, participants frequently discussed the importance of their relationship with Jesus. This underpinning was present for all other dimensions of their faith formation experiences. For example, when discussing the importance of the liturgy and the Holy Eucharist in her faith life, one participant stated that "receiving the Eucharist and then going back to work after having that experience is really valuable to me." Another participant commented about how the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in the school chapel was an important and focal formative resource for the school community.

In explaining the foundation of their faith formation experiences, participants discussed how Jesus is a central figure in the school faith community. In the eyes of one participant, it was important for him to "see the Jesus in someone." Another participant offered a similar perspective, speaking of opportunities where he could "be someone's Jesus today", and that a student could "be [his] Jesus today." A third participant recalled a poster that was displayed prominently in a public area of the school that stated: "Be it known by all here that Christ is the reason for this school."

Several participants discussed the inseparability of their personal and professional faith experiences. As one participant explained, "I come to my profession as a believing person. That's not just an add-on for me, it is part and parcel of who I am." Another participant confirmed that he frequently uses the school chapel for personal reasons and for when personal decisions needed to be made. A third participant discussed her motivation for teaching in a Catholic school. She noted, "my faith is very important to me, and I wanted to be in a place where that wasn't just accepted, but really appreciated and fostered." Many participants confirmed the importance of their personal faith lives, both in what drew them to Catholic education, and in how it all inspires them to carry out their ongoing ministry.

It is important to note that participants in this study were not uniform in their practice of faith. However, the importance of faith witness was consistently noted. In the experience of one participant who identified as a member of a Protestant denomination, there was still value to be found in joining with students in the practice of their faith as an active and supportive partner in the school's Catholic mission. This participant claimed that these experiences drew him closer to his school's Catholic identity.

Reflective Practice to Draw from the Well of Personal Experience

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the importance of reflective practice in their overall faith formation process. For some, reflection occurred outside of school, during quiet times at home, or within the context of family life. For others, the challenging and frenetic nature of school scheduling led to creative solutions that allowed for prayerful reflection to occur during the school day.

While participants confirmed the importance of prayerful reflection as part of their formative experience, many participants discussed the challenges of finding time for reflection. One participant likened it to "trying to change the oil in a moving car." It was uniformly understood that a typical school-day schedule made ongoing reflection difficult. Different participants confronted this challenge in different ways. In several cases, reflection occurred at home. One participant explained:

> Since I live alone, I have a lot of time to think on my own too, even though, you know, I sometimes just sit there and, I'm trying to think… where have I been? Where am I going? And how am I going to do this?

While some participants found time at home to engage in prayerful reflection, others found time during other parts of the day. For example, one participant discussed how the commute to school and the walk to her classroom were special times for her to reflect on the spiritual dimension of her ministry. Other participants identified creative ways to engage in prayerful reflection during the school day, such as praying for students when writing their names in the rank book, or by engaging in brief, contemplative reflection before sending email correspondence.

Encounters with Others as Opportunities to Grow in Faith

While participants confirmed the importance of prayerful reflection in their professional faith formation experience, they also discussed the importance of interactions with others as formative moments. In some cases, participants drew upon interactions with colleagues and acquaintances from years past. For example, one participant recalled a relationship with a teacher during his time as an elementary school student. According to him, this individual had a "profound influence on [his] life, as a Catholic." For another, a similar encounter occurred with a chaplain in a school in which he formerly worked. That participant described the chaplain as having been influential in helping him to connect the pedagogical dimensions of Catholic education with prayer. In some cases, participants identified their childhood experience with religious women and men teachers to be important in their preparation for ministry in Catholic education.

Other participants discussed more recent encounters with colleagues. One participant described an informal reading group that examined articles and Church documents related to Catholic education. Another, who identified as a non-Catholic, stated that his encounters with colleagues "include conversations about differences between the faiths that are in the building," and he described such dialogue to be "healthy." A third participant stated his appreciation for opportunities to "talk about faith matters, you know, how something is affecting the mission of the school."

Some participants expressed a preference for prayerful reflection over opportunities for collaboration and encounter. Others preferred encounter over personal reflection. However, participants consistently found value in both, understanding that both are interrelated processes. One participant stated:

> I think [encounter is] just more important, but I take into it my collaboration with other people, my experience with other people, what effect that has on me. I always think that whoever you meet in your lifetime leaves something with you.

Another participant confirmed that collaboration with others allowed her to grow personally when she was by herself. She discussed how, during those private reflective moments, she would ponder her identity and how it is that she develops as a member of her school faith community.

Connecting with the Experiences of the Students

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) discussed the importance of the relationship between teachers and students, stating that Catholic education "offers a great opportunity for the teachers to provide the students with a living example of what it means to be a member of that great community which is the Church" (§22). This charge was reflected in many participant interviews. One participant explained:

> I get the privilege and the burden of meeting face-to-face with roughly 100 creatures of God. Every day. And they are all, as I am, dearly and deeply beloved by the Creator. Some of His best work.

Participants identified formative experiences with students both within and outside of school, and they connected these experiences involving students with their own professional faith formation.

The classroom is the primary venue where teachers build relationships with students, and participants confirmed the importance of faithful connections with students within the context of classroom instruction. One participant shared:

> So, from 1998 to the present, I've been teaching the health course here. And all Catholic teachings that apply are discussed and taught and reinforced with what our theology department teaches. But everything we talk about, I talk about in context... "well, this is what the Church teaches, or this is what the Church teaches, and why...." And I just find that very effective.

Another participant described how she was able to connect with her students through faith-based connections in the literature curriculum. She stated:

> Catholic tradition and Christianity is so formative in literature ... I teach the Iliad and Dante's Inferno and all of these books that are laden with Christian allusion, and so it's something that just naturally comes up in class.

Other participants discussed shared experiences such as classroom prayers based on reading assignments and learning experiences with a focus on faith. In many of these examples, participants revealed that as their students grew in their faith, so too did they.

While some participants discussed relationships with students within the context of classroom instruction, others recalled relationships with students outside of the classroom walls. One participant explained:

> Encountering students [outside class is] definitely, definitely a big thing that helps along the way. You know that's who you're dealing with. You're dealing with the kids all day, and you see them in a different light, and they see you in a different light.

This sentiment was echoed by other participants who offered similar perspectives. One participant who encounters students within the context of an afterschool club found value in "[seeing] what's going on and to be a witness to the kids, which is so important." Another participant identified his experiences with students as a coach as an opportunity to be a witness to faith outside of the classroom. A third participant discussed how informal and unexpected encounters with students outside school can be formative moments and opportunities to build relationships.

Many participants agreed that opportunities for teacher-student engagement such as these resulted in the formation of students and teachers alike. These types of engagement often drew strong connections between the teacher's faith life and the faith lives of the students. One participant stated, "in terms of my faith life, understanding [that] for better or worse, my faith life is deeply integrated with the faith lives and life experience of the students." This participant discussed his affinity for a group of 60 students with whom he attends mass in the morning, stating, "those relationships are probably … the most important teacher-student relationships I have here." This growth is also evident when students and teachers serve the community together. As another participant put it, engaging in service with the students "left a lasting impression on [her] too."

Building the Kingdom of God on Earth

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) calls teachers to be mindful of the fact that Catholic education is about more than just delivering instruction. Rather, Catholic educators must model "a special awareness of being called to be positive agents of change in a society that is undergoing continuous transformation" (§30). The spiritual focus of service and the importance of connecting that experience with students were themes that were consistently identified by participants to be essential in the formation process.

Participants found value in engaging in service-related activities with students. For example, one participant, a teacher who accompanied students on service trips to Appalachia, discussed how such experiences instilled a sense of solidarity and unity in mission for students and teachers alike. Another participant, who facilitated a student service trip to Ecuador, shared a similar sentiment. She stated:

> [It] is about a ministry of presence – like where you can see the face of Christ; how you can be the face of Christ for others … And that is … a huge experience for myself and the kids.

Participants also identified more localized opportunities to engage in service. For one participant, it was within the context of a school-wide food drive. He stated, "those types of [service opportunities] have significance to me from a faith standpoint in that we as an institution are offering that opportunity." While the nature of the service might vary from school to school and individual to individual, participants found similar significance.

Additionally, participants were uniform in their explanation of the importance of a foundation of faith in service experiences. While there are many schools outside the arena of Catholic education that engage in community service in a spirit of general goodwill, the faith dimension of service in Catholic education is central to a school's Catholic identity. As one participant described:

This school – we are always sending a group out somewhere to do something for somebody. And it's always in the name of faith; we've been given a lot – how can we give back? Really, it's in the air we breathe here. That sustains me personally. I could be teaching English anywhere. I have. But there's a very special character here and I know part of it is we're commanded to be a Catholic school.

Other participants echoed this sentiment. Another participant explained:

> Every one of the public high schools has a [community service] project like this, but there's no faith component in it. … And I think that the good feeling that kids not in this building get from serving others is the same, but I think there's an additional faith-confirming benefit that our kids receive and as a result I sort of receive that too.

Within the context of this service work, participants identified service as central to their school's Catholic identity. One participant stated, "we are big on service … very big on service." Another mentioned, "I've never seen a school [such as her school] that had such a signature of community service." A third participant noted, "[the school's service work] has significance to me from a faith standpoint in that we as an institution are offering that opportunity."

Formation in the Context of Transition and Crisis

As participants discussed their experiences in formation within their Catholic school communities, they often found themselves to have grown in their faith during times of personal or professional transition. For one participant, this occurred during the Church's transition during Vatican II. Another participant reflected upon his transition through an unhealthy lifestyle to a career in Catholic education. A third participant identified the merger of his school with another school to have been an opportunity to grow in faith within the context of the school community.

Participants also reflected on moments of crisis to ultimately be formative on both personal and professional levels. They shared powerful and emotional stories about their connection with the school community as they worked through these crises. One participant shared:

> Early on in my time here, we lost four faculty members in one year. It was really something. And faculty members who had been here a long time. And again, the expression of prayer and faith at that time was spontaneous – it was very meaningful to me.

Another participant, who fought through tears to share her story, described her experience:

> As a group...[whispering now] I'm going to get emotional...my daughter has been very sick for a long time, and you only get through something like this if you have the support of the people around you. They make meals. They offer prayers. They're always asking how my daughter is doing.

A third participant shared a similar experience:

> I would have to say that one of the seminal moments came at the time that my wife passed away. That was in 2002. And the way in which the community of the school kind of coalesced was a very spiritually sustaining as well as emotionally sustaining experience.

These powerful stories shared by participants revealed how the prayerful support of a Catholic school community in difficult times can ultimately draw teachers closer to the school's mission and Catholic identity. This was shown to be true both for those experiencing the crisis, and those providing the support.
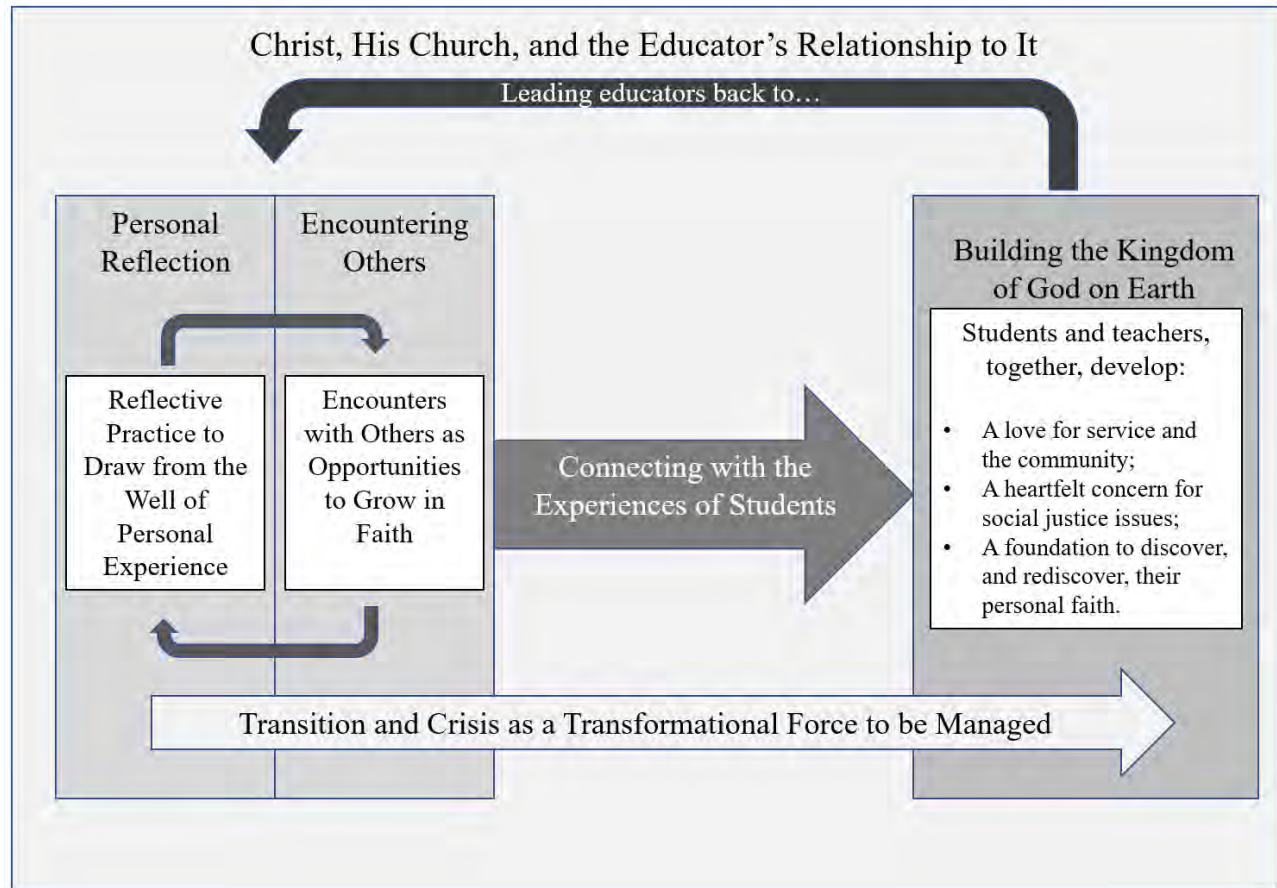
A Framework for Lay Educator Faith Formation

The prospect of lay educator faith formation can be abstract and is complicated by divergent understandings of its core elements (Graham, 2011). Thus, the framework outlined in Figure 2 proposes a more concrete process that can help Catholic secondary school leaders, particularly those whose previous formation was centered on other areas, to understand essential dimensions of an effective lay educator faith formation process. Moreover, when applied to other professional development and service-based initiatives in the school community, the framework encourages an intentional approach to making such initiatives more formative for educators.

It is important to note that the various components of the framework do not constitute separate experiences that happen independently of each other. Rather, the framework represents an ongoing process of reflection, encounter, and renewal, as traced through participant responses in this study. Participants confirmed interrelated processes of reflection and encounter, as well as the importance of student relationships, particularly within the scope of Christian service. These experiences served to provide additional context for new reflection and encounter, thus renewing the faith formation process.

Figure 2

Framework for Lay Educator Faith Formation

Recommendations

The aim of this study was to identify a framework that reveals to Catholic school leaders key interrelated dimensions that ultimately lead to lay educator faith formation. Participants identified diverse types of experiences—some formal, and some informal—that lent themselves to growth in faith and commitment to the universal mission of Catholic education. It should be noted that educators' specific experiences in different schools varied. This suggests that there is no one effective formal model or program for faith formation. The faith formation framework proposed by this study respects this and seeks instead to identify the relationships between different dimensions of faith formation that were common in the schools and among the participants studied. While this study was limited to Catholic secondary schools in the New England region, this framework proposes a logical starting point for the structuring of faith formation programming in a broader range of Catholic school settings beyond the Catholic secondary school.

Catholic secondary school educators tend to connect their personal and professional faith experiences. With that in mind, Catholic school leaders ought to consider the nature of the educators' personal faith experiences in the school setting, particularly regarding parish involvement and liturgy. As Cook (2015) stated, dimensions of personal faith and professional faith are interrelated. Moreover, faith development is "an existential developmental reality" (Groom, 1980, p. 57), organic and relative to the individual. Because faith is dynamic and varies from person to person, leaders need to be intentional about building relationships to better understand the nature of educators' personal faith. Leaders make a strong statement about the relevance of faith formation to educators' lives when they are strategic about connecting opportunities for faith formation with educators' faith lives outside the school.

The proposed framework also emphasizes the importance of personal reflection and encounter with colleagues. As Cook (2015) asserts, these too are interrelated processes. Thus, a well-formed faith formation effort in a Catholic secondary school community would incorporate both dimensions. These dimensions do not always need to be structured, formalized programs. Rather, just the availability of an appropriate place in the school for spontaneous prayer and reflection, or a few minutes built into the schedule during faculty or professional learning community meetings for faith-based discussion, can be effective strategies.

 Cho (2012) stated that "for Catholic school teachers who have a living faith, the faith would be placed in the center of intrinsic motivation for their commitment to mission, the school, teaching, and students" (p. 124). This framework confirms the centrality of students in an effective school-wide faith formation effort that epitomizes living faith through service-oriented activities. Jacobs (2005) asserted that faith formation culminates in intentional acts that glorify God on Earth. If Catholic school leaders design faith formation activities and service opportunities to include both students and educators in solidarity, it would likely enhance those individual efforts and promote closer connections within the context of the school community itself.

Finally, amid this ongoing process of faith formation, transitions and crises happen. Sometimes, these moments can be anticipated. Other times, they are unexpected and disrupt other ongoing efforts. By understanding when moments of transition and personal crisis are occurring, and by promoting appropriate faithful supports, it will lead the school to more accurately reflect ideal dimensions of a charitable Christian community.

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) stated, "the integration of culture and faith is mediated by the other integration of faith and life in the person of the teacher" (§43). The faith witness of the educator is therefore crucial. As Catholic schools should be communities permeated by the Gospel spirit, so too should Catholic school educators provide authentic faith witness in their own lives (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988). Archbishop Miller (2005) asserted that, with very few exceptions, Catholic school educators should be practicing Catholics.

However, according to a recent statistical study by the National Catholic Educational Association (2019), 15.6% of Catholic school educators in the United States were reported to be non-Catholic. While the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) has gratefully acknowledged the presence of non-Catholic educators who support the universal mission of Catholic education, it remains important to consider their needs regarding their formation to accomplish this task. Catholic schools would benefit from a study of the impact of the presence of non-Catholic educators on a school's Catholic identity. Such a study could also propose appropriate strategies and actions to better prepare non-Catholics in Catholic schools for a faithful ministry in Catholic education.

Conclusion

Vatican documents on Catholic education have consistently identified Catholic schools to be an essential component of the evangelizing and salvific mission of the Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, 2014; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1982). The extent to which Catholic schools will be able to continue to fulfill this mission will be primarily dependent upon the lay educators of the Catholic school community, whose authentic and transparent faith witness serves as a transformative example for students to encounter the risen Christ within the context of their Catholic school communities (Miller, 2005). Catholic school leaders can find great hope and optimism in these lay educators who remain wholly committed to the educational project of the Catholic Church. When Catholic school leaders attend to the various interrelated dimensions of faith formation that were revealed in this study, Catholic schools will come alive as authentic, faithful Christian communities, inspirational and true to their commitment to form students into the humans whom God intended them to be.

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