Cultivating Catholic Classroom Communities During Remote Teaching

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Abstract: In this COVID-era study, Catholic school teachers report the challenges that they experienced in supporting classroom communities during remote instruction, as well as the strategies that they enacted to address such challenges and make robust relationships with and among remote students. While teachers engaged in remote teaching, they were also studying in a Catholic Master of Arts in Teaching program, where they participated in weekly Freirian culture circles — structured dialogues designed to help teachers identify problems of equity and collectively devise appropriate responses. The teachers found that classroom community was hindered by a lack of in-person affordances, socioemotional stressors related to the pandemic, struggles to engage students, and structures of hybrid teaching. In response, teachers used the culture circles to create and/or share strategies for supporting remote classroom communities, such as classroom meetings and small-group collaboration. Teachers recognized that efforts to develop classroom communities were intimately connected to commitments to equity.

Keywords: culture circles, K-12 teaching, classroom communities

n March 2020, Catholic elementary and high schools across the country responded to the COVID-19 health crisis by rapidly closing physical campuses and transitioning to remote schooling. The ensuing move to asynchronous, synchronous, or hybrid instruction has transformed K–12 teaching and raised challenges for Catholic school students, as well as exacerbated historical inequities within schools. Recent studies indicate that the pandemic has wrought, and will likely continue to bring, an experience of displacement for many K–12 students (Stark et al., 2020). In particular, adolescents have reported greater levels of loneliness

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and depression, which have been linked to a lack of shared experiences with peers (Ellis et al., 2020). Stark et al. (2020) suggest that social supports found within caring relationships with adults **and peers can help promote children's resilience, even in the face of stressors related to the impact** of COVID-19: In other words, it is in classroom communities that students are more likely to find ways to cope with the tensions of living—and learning—in a pandemic.

Building and sustaining classroom communities in remote schooling, however, is challenging and fraught with hindrances, including a lack of opportunities to create and sustain friendships (Anderson et al., 2010), isolation in learning (Ratliff, 2018), and disconnection from the school and its mission (Berry, 2019). While some Catholic, public, and charter schools gradually welcomed students back in-person in the fall of 2020, many families, particularly those from Black and Latinx communities, faced obstacles that prevented their children from attending in-person schools (Shapiro, 2020). With the continued spread of COVID-19 variants and a slow roll-out of vaccines for young children, many students may continue to be educated virtually, away from the physical presence of their teachers and peers. Given the stakes for all children in schools today—especially for those marginalized by race and/or impacted by mental health issues—the question of how to support classroom community through remote teaching has become a matter of educational equity in Catholic schools.

This study examined the efforts of Catholic school teachers who, in the spring and fall of 2020, endeavored to cultivate robust classroom communities in the face of challenges surfaced by remote teaching amidst a pandemic. During this time, the teachers participated in Freirian culture circles, **which were embedded in their graduate coursework toward a master's degree and which centered** on the problems of practice they encountered in remote teaching. The study explored the challenges that Catholic school teachers encountered in remote teaching, and the responsive approaches they developed in culture circles to address these problems and establish connections within virtual classrooms. Our research builds on previous scholarship calling for greater attention to relationships in Catholic education (Cook & Simonds, 2011; Fussell, 2020) by offering practical guidance for teachers during COVID-era schooling.

Community from a Catholic, Sociocultural, and Critical Perspective

From a Catholic education lens, paired with sociocultural and critical perspectives, classroom community is an essential element of student development and a defining feature of Catholic schools (Ozar & Weitzel-**O'Nei**ll, 2012). In *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the United States Conference of Catholic United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1972) states that one of the primary purposes of Catholic education is the promotion of Christian community. Because the Church calls **each member to "live in a community, as a social being, and as a member of the People of God"** (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, no. 22), the Catholic school classroom ought not only to

teach students about the communitarian dimension of the faith, but provide tangible opportunities to practice communal life with each other in school. This experience of Catholic community within the classroom is essential if students are to fulfill a mission of the Church in remaking society into a more communitarian form (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982).

The Catholic tradition of education not only underscores the importance of community within schools and classrooms but also points to what such communities entail. For example, Catholic **school teachers endeavoring to build classroom community are encouraged to "establish the** strictest possible relationship of solidarity among all persons; through mutual love and an ecclesial **community,"** where **"Catholic** educators can be certain that they make human beings more **human"** (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, no. 18). Such relationships of solidarity between teachers and students in Catholic classroom communities represent a dialogue where teachers learn about their **students'** lives and then use that familiarity to guide them more effectively in their holistic development as human beings (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982). This personal and dialogical relationship between teacher and students requires intimate, ethical care because the act of teaching is one of **"extraordinary** moral **depth"** in its potential to write **"on** the very spirits **of human beings" (Congregation for Catholic Education , 1998, no. 19).** As the foundational guide for shaping classroom environments, Nuzzi (2012) points to the mystery of the Trinity, which **"calls** teachers and students alike to work together and collaborate, to grow and to learn, to develop and to change, all within the embrace of a loving **community"** (p. 6).

Creating a dialogical, caring community among students and the teacher not only shapes the moral and spiritual ethos of a classroom, but it also facilitates the relationships necessary for cognitive and social development. From a sociocultural perspective, learning occurs through a process of **"guided participation"** (Rogoff , 2003, p. 283), where a more skilled partner (i.e., teacher) provides close, scaffolded supports for the learner to make progress toward developing a certain skill. This context for learning—**which Vygotsky (1978) termed the "zone of proximal development"** (p.86)—has two dimensions: the interpsychological dimension, where the teacher and learner dialogically share their internalized thought processes with one another, and the interrelational dimension, which consists of the socioemotional encounter between the two parties (Goldstein, 1999). The interrelational dimension precedes learning; that is, the teacher and learner must share a level of mutual trust and emotional resonance before guided participation can occur. Moreover, the **interrelational dimension facilitates the guided participation and "emerges after the learning experience in a transformed and deepened form" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 654).** In other words, the personal relationship between a teacher and learner—their communal connection to one another— not only opens the process of learning, but strengthens as a result.

Classroom communities are also essential from a critical perspective, which views learning as a process of not just development, but also one of transformation and humanization through critical

consciousness (Darder, 2002). For Freire (1970), problem-posing and praxis through dialogue drive this transformation: Individuals in dialogue with others **"read** the **world"** to uncover problems of inequity and then engage in collective reflection and action to re-make the world, learn, and grow more fully human in relationship with one another. Dialogue not only encourages multiple viewpoints and a diversity of thought and expression, but also deepens mutual relationships of solidarity among participants. Through dialogue, del Carmen Salazar (2013) writes, **"students** and teachers are able to co-construct a network of trust that allows them to identify problems and **solutions"** (p. 132) and to establish **"trusting** and caring relationships [that] advance the pursuit of **humanization"** (p. 138).

Vision of Catholic Classroom Community

By "caring, Catholic classroom community", we envisage connections among students and teachers that not only include but also extend beyond typical definitions of a learning community found in educational research (Watson & Battistich, 2006). We see classroom community as both a project and an end in-and-of itself—**an intentional and "tightly knit web of meaningful"** (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xvi) relationships among students and the teacher, for the purpose of growing in communion with others (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982). Clearly, learning is a central endeavor and outcome of classroom community, but from the Catholic education perspective, it encompasses more than simply the technical or academic growth usually associated **with the term "learning communities." In particular, it aims to ensure "that the student is seen as** a person whose intellectual growth is harmonized with spiritual, religious, emotional, and social **growth"** (Ozar & Weitzel-**O'Neill,** 2012, p. 3) by providing the student **"with** a unique and enduring sense **...** of belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas and values that make our lives **meaningful"** (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xiii).

Our vision of Catholic classroom community leverages the theories on learning and Catholic education referenced earlier and integrates them within a frame proposed by Sergiovanni (1994), who suggests that tight-knit, holistic, and humanizing school-based communities are comprised of three relationships:

- *Relationships of mind*, or shared habits of mind, which include a **group's** collective purpose,

norms, values, and ideals. Breitborde (1996) suggests that these values and ideals involve **"group** responsibility, empathy and responsiveness, cooperative participation, critical thinking and problem-solving, consensual decision making, and conflict **resolution"** (p. 370).

- *Relationships by kinship*, which relate to the affective dimensions of community and are based on **"understandings similar to those within the family" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 7)**—namely, familiarity, unconditional acceptance, respect and an asset view of others, a sense of solidarity, and interest in and care for each other (Breitborde, 1996; Watson & Battistich, 2006).

- *Relationships of place*, which represent how members share space and resources, and pursue **cooperative endeavors. In relationships of place, "members make decisions cooperatively, resolve conflicts constructively, and take responsibility for their own learning and behavior" in collective** practices (Breitborde, 1996; Watson & Battistich, 2005).

We acknowledge the overlap among shared habits, affect, and collective practices within community; however, we contend that this frame offers several affordances: It aligns closely with our theoretical perspective on learning, encompasses a myriad of classroom aspects, and provides useful characterizations for analyzing factors that contribute to relationships among teachers and students in a classroom.

Literature on Building Classroom Community

While this conception of Catholic community provides a theoretical roadmap for what goes into these connections, extant scholarship offers little practical guidance for teachers in building such communities for remote K–12 classrooms. To look for recommendations in this area, we examined the literature on building community for in-person K–12 classrooms and online classrooms in higher education.

Applying **Sergiovanni's** composition of relationships to research on in-person classroom communities, we found that establishing clear and consistent classroom norms with students (Frank, 2000), using saints and the Gospels as examples of Christian virtues (Lickona, 1997), integrating **students'** cultural and spiritual values and practices in the classroom (Dallavis, 2011), and finding opportunities to give students responsibilities (i.e., chores or classroom jobs; Watson & Battistich, 2006) all helped build relationships of mind among students and teachers. Relationships by kinship seemed to be promoted when teachers held regular classroom meetings throughout the academic year (Watson & Battistich, 2006) and sought extra time outside of class to connect personally with students (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). The literature offered multiple ways for teachers to build the relationships of place among their students, including classroom rituals like daily worship, prayer services, and songs to mark the meaning of regular occurrences (LeBlanc, 2019; Scully & Howell, 2008); involving students in the co-construction of curriculum and learning activities (Frank, 2000); and crafting collaborative and project-based learning opportunities for students (Watson & Battistich, 2006).

In studies of online classroom community at the university level, few recommendations are offered for creating relationships of mind beyond providing students with clearly articulated assignments that set norms for collaborative work (Anderson et al., 2010; Rovai, 2001). For asynchronous courses, studies suggest that frequently communicating with students through email (Young & Bruce, 2011) and asking students to post written personal introductions to online discussion boards might help them develop familiarity of relationships in kinship (Anderson et al., 2010; Ratliff, 2018; Rovai, 2001).

For synchronous courses, instructors might use videoconferencing to make space
for students to engage in socioemotional check-ins during class time (Berry, 2019). To facilitate
relationships of place, the literature suggests that course instructors use discussion boards to
help students exchange ideas and provide feedback on each **other's** posts (Rovai, 2001; Ratliff,
2018); employ breakout rooms and chat features of synchronous technologies to help teachers and
students discuss topics in small groups (Berry, 2017); and assign students to work collaboratively on
course projects (Ratliff, 2018; Young & Bruce, 2011).

While this literature offers methods that *might* help in building classrooms in remote K–12
schooling, they have yet to be explored in that context, and especially within a social environment
as distinct as Catholic schools, during a time of acute uncertainty and emotional stress (such as the
COVID-19 pandemic). Thus, the question persists as to how Catholic school teachers can create
caring, Catholic communities with and among their students in remote K–12 classrooms and what
challenges teachers might encounter within such work.

Enacting Freirian Culture Circles in a Catholic Teacher Education Program

To address this question, we examined the online community-building experiences that K–12
teachers reported in their classrooms, while those same teachers participated in Freirian culture
circles through coursework in a Catholic teacher education program.

Culture circles grew from the philosophy and practice of Paulo Freire, who used them
with marginalized agrarian workers in **Brazil's** adult literacy campaigns of the 1960s (Darder,
2002). Freire (1977) developed culture circles as a way to humanize the learning process by drawing
from the lived experiences of learners and involving them as partners in the co-construction of new
knowledge. While their structure resembles that of other cycles of applied reflection, Freire (1993)
saw culture circles as having a distinctive aim: to orient learning toward deeper reflection on and
awareness of injustice in the world, and toward thoughtful action taken to bring about greater equity
in education. Since Freire published his work on culture circles, they have been studied globally
in professional education across a wide range of fields, but in the United States, they have gained
recent traction in teacher education (Souto-Manning, 2010).

In the teacher education setting, a culture circle typically consists of a group of pre- or in-service
K–12 teachers and a facilitator (usually a teacher educator), who follow a five-step process called
the "critical cycle" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 32). In the first step, the facilitator learns about the
work experiences of the teachers and then **partners with them in selecting a "generative theme," a**
key equity-related **topic impacting the teachers' practice. Next, the culture circle gathers together**
to engage in a process of problem-posing, whereby members name and describe challenges they
encounter within the classroom that align with the generative theme. The facilitator then leads the
teachers in a dialogue in which members share their varied perspectives on the potential causes of

these problems and their underlying issues of—and implications for—equity in the K–12 classroom. In this dialogue, members also propose and discuss potential courses of action to undertake toward addressing the problems of practice. In the fourth step, the teachers collectively and/or individually reflect on the dialogue, and then craft and carry out plans for future changes to their teaching practice. Finally, when the culture circle next reconvenes, members report on the impact of their pedagogical changes and name new challenges that have surfaced, thereby re-engaging in the critical cycle.

In this study, we followed the critical cycles as we engaged with others in culture circles across two practicum courses.[1] These courses were embedded in a university-based Master of Arts in Teaching program designed specifically for Catholic school teachers working on the West Coast. The first practicum course enrolled 26 teachers and took place in the spring quarter of 2020. The second enrolled 33 teachers and ran during the fall of 2020. All teachers attending these courses worked full-time across a wide variety of K–12 Catholic school contexts, from suburban schools serving more socioeconomically privileged student populations to urban and rural schools serving predominantly low-income Latinx families, many of whom were recent arrivals to the United States. While the majority of teachers were novices, many had over five years of experience in the classroom. The first author, John, served as the instructor for both courses. The third author, Julia, was a fifth-grade teacher enrolled in the spring practicum, while the second author, Krizia, (a kindergarten teacher) and fourth author, John S. (a middle school math teacher), attended the fall course.

Across both courses, John partnered with teachers to craft a generative theme: *supporting equity for K–12 Catholic school students through remote teaching during a global health crisis*. Each week of both academic terms, John and the teachers met synchronously over videoconference platforms (due to university COVID-19 restrictions) to engage in culture circles, where teachers shared problems of practice, discussed issues of equity underlying those challenges, and devised potential approaches to address them.

Each culture circle dialogue lasted 30–60 minutes and was video-recorded and transcribed. Immediately after a circle, teachers were assigned to individually: (a) complete a written reflection, which asked teachers to summarize the problem(s) posed during the circle; (b) identify underlying issues of equity connected with the problem(s); and, (c) craft a plan for how they would use insights from the dialogue to inform their future teaching practices. As a final project for both courses, teachers were asked to either submit video reflections or engage in a video-recorded reflective conversation with John around what they had learned from the culture circles in relation to the generative theme. These video reflections and reflective conversations were then transcribed.

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[1]   Practicum courses—requirements for state teaching credentials—are designed to help teachers develop the skills necessary for career-long reflection on practice.

In John's initial analysis of the data corpus (composed of culture circle transcriptions, written weekly reflections, and transcripts of final video reflections or reflective conversations), he found that one of the most frequent topics discussed in the culture circles and corresponding reflections was related to building community among students during remote teaching (along with the challenges of this work). Research on culture circles and other critical pedagogies often follows humanizing research methodologies that are derived from **Freire's** philosophy and invite university-based researchers to join teachers as research partners who co-construct knowledge through collective analysis of and dialogue on collected data (Stillman & Beltramo, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2010). In accordance with this approach, the first author invited all teachers across both courses to join this study and collaboratively explore the data more closely around the following research question: Through their participation in culture circles, what specific challenges did teachers claim to encounter during remote teaching, and what methods did teachers develop to address these problems and to build robust classroom communities among their students?

The other authors agreed to partner with first author, and engaged in dialogic analysis (Saldaña, 2013). Initially, we combed through the data corpus to get a sense of where teachers most clearly expressed their learning around the development of remote classroom communities. We then narrowed our analytical focus on the final video reflections and reflective conversations and used a set of codes developed from theory on classroom community to examine: (a) what obstacles teachers faced when cultivating remote classroom communities, and (b) how they reported tackling these challenges by devising and operationalizing specific teaching strategies. We met as a research team to discuss and reflect on our observations from the data, adding to and trimming our list of codes, negotiating shared understandings of those codes, identifying illustrative examples of them, and making theoretical connections across them. In our efforts at member-checking, we then presented our initial observations to a larger group of study participants, and asked them for feedback, which was later integrated into our findings.

Findings

Through their collective and personal reflections that grew from culture circles, the participants identified a handful of persistent challenges that constrained the *relationships of mind, relationships by kinship, and relationships of place* they sought to develop with and among their students. We also found that participants interpreted these challenges as a potential threat to equity and reported developing a host of corresponding pedagogical approaches to build strong, Catholic communities in their virtual or hybrid classrooms. In the section below, we apply Sergiovanni (1994) framework to these challenges and approaches to supporting classroom community.

Relationships of Mind

After several days or weeks of asynchronous instruction, all participants reported switching to synchronous teaching using videoconferencing platforms sometime in the spring of 2020. Soon afterward, teachers observed students who struggled—at least initially—to participate fully in synchronous learning opportunities with their peers, especially within breakout rooms. Many culture circle dilemmas involved questions of how to engage students whose cameras and microphones remained off during class discussions or small-group collaboration and thus challenged teachers to assess student attention (and even presence) during synchronous classes. Teachers worried that students who struggled to connect during collaborative tasks missed out on key chances for community building and also created inequitable opportunities for learning.

We saw such student disengagement as limiting the relationships of mind: Our participants reported struggling to build with some students essential shared values and commitments, such as cooperation and group responsibility. In particular, conversations in culture circles revealed the limitations of teacher-established norms and standardized content to effectively support all students in developing the common commitments needed for engagement. In response, teachers began crafting strategies to integrate students and their own lived experiences into the curriculum and learning activities.

For example, participants began more intentionally incorporating **students'** racial and ethnic identities and cultures into their curriculum and instruction. Luís, a Spanish teacher at an urban high school, reflected:

> **What's engaging students well is that I embrace their cultures. I ask th**em what kind of songs they like, and I play them in class. I give them time to share stories about their families and going to work with parents. Students feel like I am actually embracing their culture, and **they're** reacting to it by building this very strong relationship with me.

Teachers also reported inviting students to help set norms for their participation in collaborative settings, which not only gave students greater clarity around expectations for their group work but also allowed them some degree of agency in shaping what those expectations were. For instance, across several culture circles, Lucy—a secondary math teacher at a suburban school—showed her peers how to involve students in creating the rules and roles meant to **"establish trust"** and facilitate engagement within small-group tasks.

Beyond involving students in setting norms for their treatment of one another, teachers in the culture circles also highlighted student agency as a way to support engagement by building common commitments. For example, Naomi—a social studies teacher at an urban middle school—shared that she often taps more reticent student participants to take on leadership roles in small-group work. Naomi suggested that, through leadership roles, such students see their impact on **"and**

welcome **from"** peers in the group and this can result in their **"hands** shooting up in the **class"** to volunteer in later discussions. At the elementary level, teachers in rural schools like Paula and Divina involved their students as **"co-teachers,"** who helped lead lessons in both curricular (e.g., reading strategies) and extra-curricular topics (e.g., personal hobbies).

By centering students' cultures in the curriculum, involving students in norm-setting, and promoting student voices in the classroom, participants learned that developing relationships of mind, especially in the virtual classroom, means finding commitments and values that are both shared by and authentic to the students of the classroom community. Anita—a math teacher at a suburban middle school—noted that norms for engagement are unlikely to be adopted unless they **"fit** who our students are **…** and identify with their **lives."**

Relationships by Kinship

As they responded to student disengagement and its obstacle to fostering relationships of mind, our participants also noted challenges that hindered relationships by kinship, or the affective dimensions of classroom community. When schooling went remote, many teachers reported a disconnect from their students, even despite interacting with them during synchronous lessons. In their culture circle discussions, participants pointed to the loss of unplanned opportunities for connection usually afforded by in-person teaching. Luís noted that he typically relied upon developing community with students, **"not** only within the classroom, but also outside it, during lunch, in the hallway during passing periods when I see students **…** Now we **don't** have those places **anymore."** Without these physical spaces and the **"small** moments to **bond"** they allow for, teachers in our culture circle quickly learned that cultivating and sustaining classroom community remotely required more than just an openness to relationship but an intentionality—a commitment to carve out time for building familiarity, trust, and connection with and among students. Participants in the culture circles devised several community-building strategies to replace the lost moments of in-person bonding and recover their relationships by kinship.

Several teachers reported connecting with their new students prior to the start of the 2020–2021 school year. For example, Brisa (a second-grade teacher at an urban elementary school) sent each student a traditional letter with personalized notes in Spanish and English welcoming them to her classroom. Other teachers organized whole-class videoconference calls with their new students in the weeks leading up to the first day of school, when they presented information about their lives and asked students to do the same.

Every teacher from the fall course also reported dedicating the first several days of the new school year toward building familiarity among students through extensive use of **"ice-breaker"** activities. Anita noted:

> I really took the time in those first three days of school like an orientation to have the kids get

> to know each other again … I wanted them to have the opportunity to be able to share that with their classmates, especially those students who were new.

Some of these ice breakers asked students to compose and post to discussion boards short digital narratives and poems about their experiences of a "COVID summer," to create and share Google slides about their hobbies and interests, and to conduct formal interviews with classmates and translate this collected information into presentations on each other's lives.

Similarly, each teacher sought to extend their community-building endeavors beyond the initial weeks of school this fall. Most often they did so by setting aside 5–10 minutes of their synchronous classes for facilitating weekly or daily discussions around "life-openers," or questions meant to help community members build trust with one another by inviting them to talk about personal experiences, aspirations, desires, or fears. Sarah (a fourth-grade teacher at a suburban elementary school) shared:

> We have a discussion every morning that involves all the students and gets them thinking about themselves and each other … I give them a prompt, like, "What's the story behind your name?" or "What are you most motivated by?" … I'm glad we do that because we get to see another side of us.

Teachers also created assignments (more or less formally), where students were tasked with presenting or creating artifacts that shared personal information about their identities. Tanya and Caroline—both secondary math teachers at suburban schools—invited their students to film short "day-in-the-life" videos about their racial, ethnic, and cultural practices, and then either present them during synchronous classes or post them to video-sharing platforms. Several elementary teachers from our culture circles reported that their students participated in weekly show-and-tell presentations over videoconference, where students would introduce objects from their homes that aligned with a content-related theme.

Another challenge to these relationships by kinship was reported in the socioemotional stressors associated with the pandemic, which took a toll on many students' wellbeing and likely impacted their affective connections to schooling, learning, and one another. As Veronica, an English teacher at an urban middle school, noted: "We're in a pandemic … it of course affects our students and also makes classroom community more challenging," particularly as students contended with feelings of fear for essential workers from their families, uncertainty about the duration of social restrictions, and displacement from their typical lives—all while trying to make academic progress in school. Given the emotional strain students experienced, especially those from minoritized communities who were most impacted by COVID-19's devastation, teachers turned to several strategies designed to build community by helping students marshal their resilience, process their emotions, and find care and hope within the virtual classroom.

Most of our elementary teachers reported using daily socioemotional check-ins during synchronous classes, where students were given an opportunity to share with their peers the emotions they were experiencing during pandemic realities and virtual schooling. Secondary teachers often employed "mood meters" to do the same: Students were shown a series of images depicting various emotional states and were asked to identify the one that best aligned with their current feelings. Laura, a religion teacher at a suburban middle school, commented that these mood meters represent "those kinds of things that build community because they give students time to validate each other's emotions and hear [each other]."

Multiple teachers across grade levels reported their use of dialogue journals to help students examine and share their emotions and experiences during COVID-era schooling. In this activity, students created digital journals (hand-written and scanned, blogged, or vlogged) about their lives while sheltering-in-place, and then shared them with their teacher and/or other students, who responded to the original entry and continued a digital conversation. Nicholas, an English teacher at an urban high school, remarked:

> The strongest thing I did to support students' socioemotional wellbeing was [dialogue] journals … Some of [the prompts] were more emotionally focused, like, "What is one way that you can care for yourself today?" … I like to ask things that allow them to think in fun and social ways but also allow them to do some emotional processing about quarantine life. Then I leave a comment, like, "I can understand what you're going through."

To help nurture positive emotions and connections among students, teachers also set aside time for classroom members to intentionally affirm and share explicit expressions of concern and care for one another. For example, Jocelyn, an English teacher at an urban middle school, led her students in monthly email affirmations: Each student was assigned two classmates, to whom they were responsible for writing a brief note of appreciation or recognition. Jocelyn then collected these digital notes and sent them to the designees as anonymous emails.

Additionally, many of our teachers reported holding office hours where they gathered individually or with small groups of students—not simply to provide instructional support, but often to make or facilitate personal connections and to check in with students who seemed to be struggling socioemotionally. Other teachers opened their videoconference classrooms early or remained online after synchronous classes finished so that students had time to connect with them and their classmates in informal chat sessions. Lukas, a math and science teacher at a rural middle school, shared: "I keep the Zoom open after class so that they're able to talk to each other and me … It really helps establish that relationship with my class." Several teachers used their videoconference virtual classrooms to host "lunch bunches" with small groups of their students, who ate while chatting with one another informally about their lives. For example, Laura joined her students each week for virtual lunches

to give them a chance to build that community and I found that most kids really liked it ... One of the lunch bunches was the most successful because it turned into kind of an affirmation circle ... I think [it] really built morale and actually helped students who were actually going through a rough patch.

Perhaps most powerfully, teachers reported creating opportunities for students in synchronous classes to lead daily prayer, where classmates offered personal intentions, prayed for them and each other, shared those blessings for which they were most grateful, and collectively engaged in Catholic traditions of spiritual reflection, such as Daily Examens or decades of the rosary. Sarah invited students to lead prayers at multiple times throughout the day and found that such opportunities "**center** the class and gets us to remember that **we're** always together in the presence of **God.**" Naomi shared that her students always started class with prayerful intentions,

> **which I think is really nice because it gives students the space to share what's in their hearts,** and a lot of times that revolves around the pandemic, or for family members who are essential workers, or friends who may have been exposed to coronavirus. So I think that sharing that obviously involves a level of trust [and] lets students know that **they're** not alone.

By transitioning from informal, unplanned moments of connection to intentionally crafted opportunities of bonding, and by creating spaces for students to harness hope and resilience during a pandemic, our participants found ways of overcoming obstacles to relationships by kinship. As Leah—a kindergarten teacher at an urban elementary school—noted, such relationships were necessary for both classroom community and equity:

> I think equity always comes back to the relationships we create intentionally for our students **... It was easy to see in a lot of culture circle dilemmas, when there wasn't a solid relationship** formed, there was more inequity. And a lot of times the solution would always come back to that relationship aspect of equity and how important that is for students to feel cared for, feel valued, like **they're** part of the puzzle pieces of this classroom. So I think for me the relationship is the founding piece of equity.

For Leah and other teachers in this study, relationships by kinship supplied classroom communities with the emotional resonance that bound teachers to students and thereby facilitated the more individualized, responsive instruction needed for equitable learning opportunities.

Relationships of Place

As Sergiovanni proposed, classroom communities depend on relationships of place, or engagement in activities that are collective in nature and that hold particular meaning for members. The teachers in our study identified two issues that commonly challenged their efforts at establishing relationships of place: an overemphasis on purely academic learning and a disconnect between in-person and remote students during hybrid instruction.

In the fall culture circles, many participants worried that, given how the shift to remote teaching had impeded instruction in the spring, the amount of learning students needed to do during the 2020–2021 school year would necessitate a strong focus on academic progress. They wondered how they might maintain a commitment to community building through meaningful shared engagements while also balancing it with curriculum demands. Time was further limited, as teachers such as Lisa—a religion teacher at a suburban middle school—tried to ration the number of hours students were tethered to a computer for their learning: "I definitely want to do more with relationships within homeroom. But it's hard because that means extra screen time."

In response, many teachers found opportunities to integrate community building and curriculum through academic collaboration among students. For example, Lucy centered her geometry instruction around small-group problem-solving opportunities, where students depended on each other for daily contributions to their collaborative notes and assignments. Similarly, Frances—a theology teacher at a suburban high school—apportioned substantial amounts of synchronous classes to collaboration, where she initially grouped students with the same individuals to build and support continuity in peer relationships, and later with new peers to extend networks among classmates.

At different points over the fall, many of our teachers returned to their campuses for hybrid (or "concurrent") teaching, where a portion of their students joined them physically for in-person learning while others remained at home to engage in remote learning. Nearly all of the teachers who worked in these hybrid settings observed that the spirit of community altered after this transition and recognized a key inequity: Relationships fostered during purely remote schooling were bolstered for in-person students but seemed to diminish at least initially for at-home students (including many students from low-income families), who struggled to interact with in-person peers they could no longer see on their screens. Additionally, teachers in hybrid settings reported that working with in-person students consumed more of their time and attention, leaving less of these for sustaining relationships with at-home students. To address these inequities of community development within hybrid classrooms, our teachers relied on strategies that connected at-home and in-person students and/or that involved multiple activities, as mentioned above.

To help create contact points between at-home and in-person students, Tina—a fifth-grade teacher at a rural elementary school—established "weekend buddies": Each Friday, two students from different contexts were paired with one another and assigned to chat with each other over the weekend through instant message or a phone call. Tina reported that weekend buddies "really fed their relationships" among students and bridged the at-home/in-person divide. Brooklyn— a fourth-grade teacher at a suburban elementary school—partnered with parents to address this divide. When Brooklyn observed an at-home student struggling to connect with in-person peers, she would set up a videoconference outside of class time and invite the student and their parents,

as well as an in-**person student and their parents. Brooklyn reported that these "virtual play dates"** helped students not just feel connected with one another but also develop relationships among both students and parents.

Many of our teachers working in hybrid classrooms also relied on classroom meetings (sometimes called **"morning meetings"** in elementary classrooms) as critical spaces for sustaining community among in-person and at-home students. These classroom meetings, particularly those at the elementary level, consisted of a series of activities to welcome students, develop their **familiarity with one another, introduce the school day and its objectives, and foster students'** spiritual and socioemotional wellbeing. For example, Krizia (a kindergarten teacher at an urban elementary school) and Julia (a fifth-grade teacher at a rural elementary school) began each day with synchronous morning meetings that included both in-person students and at-home students (who are virtually present through a videoconference platform). Their morning meetings started with students welcoming one another, then moved into opening prayer, followed by a socioemotional check-in and a whole-class discussion around a life-share question. Krizia also typically led her students in several songs that touched on the calendar and literacy, while Julia tended to integrate socioemotional skill development by asking her class to share (and present solutions to) problems that had arisen for students at home or in their neighborhoods.

Classroom meetings were also reported by some of our middle and high school teachers, who tended to use these spaces to help students discuss their emotions, share recent and meaningful life experiences, and affirm one **another's** value to the classroom. Lukas, for instance, structured his weekly classroom meetings as culture circles, where both he and his students shared problems they encountered in and outside of schools, prayed about those experiences, and then offered potential solutions. Lukas remarked that his participation in classroom meetings

> makes myself vulnerable for my students so that they can see that I care for them, that **it's** okay for them to share stories about struggling, some emotional stories. So, it builds relationships **because my students start connecting, start realizing that it's okay to open up, it's okay to feel** things. So culture circles definitely support my [classroom] community.

From these examples, we propose that when faced with challenges around creating relationships of place, teachers from this study learned to lean into collaborative learning opportunities and classroom meetings, which centered on student interdependence. For participants like Tina, such practices were critical for an equity-oriented classroom, where the teacher and students work together to meet each **student's needs:**

> I rely a lot on my students who are getting their academic and social needs met to help me with those who might need a little more assistance ... Now when one of them has a need that **I'm** not

meeting at that particular second because **I'm** with somebody else, my students can help each other. **That's** where I felt like I built that community that helped me reach my equity goals.

Thus, for Tina and other participants, supporting and leveraging relationships of place enhanced equity, in that students at times were able to take on some of the responsibility for helping each other learn and grow.

Discussion and Conclusion

When viewed together, we propose that these findings hold several implications for the development of communities within Catholic schools and their classrooms, particularly during COVID-era schooling. First, drawing from **Sergiovanni's** theory, the findings reveal critical points of intersection among the relationships of mind, relationships by kinship, and relationships of place necessary for caring, Catholic classroom communities: Where teachers from our study found and responded to challenges within one type of relationship, the resulting strategies often reinforced another type of relationship. For example, when hybrid formats constrained relationships of place between in-person and remote students, our participants began implementing more classroom meetings for their students. These meetings not only provided students with collective, meaningful activities for relationships of place, but also afforded them opportunities to process their emotions and develop social skills, thereby potentially strengthening their relationships by kinship. Thus, we surmise that each type of relationship within community building depends on and strengthens one another. We suggest that teachers encountering challenges to community in any aspect of their classroom might consider strategies that address the shared values, affective connections, and/or collaborative endeavors among students.

Second, the findings also highlight the crucial interdependence between caring, Catholic classroom communities, and the pursuit of equity in classroom instruction. When discussions in culture circles centered on challenges in **teachers'** efforts at building or sustaining classroom communities, participants often recognized resultant inequities. For example, when considering the socioemotional wellbeing of students during a pandemic, teachers like Veronica and Nicholas voiced their concerns about the stress experienced by low-income and minoritized students, whose connections to community (and associated opportunities for learning) were most threatened. For these teachers, building and sustaining classroom communities, particularly for students from historically marginalized communities, can only happen when the sense of belonging and socioemotional wellbeing of every student is recognized through mutually supportive, caring classroom relationships. Thus, we invite Catholic school teachers and leaders to see their work around building community, which has long been embrace by Catholic education, as also the beginning (or continuation) of a critical commitment to educational equity.

Third, we contend that a commitment to building strong, caring communities within Catholic

schools and classrooms has always been an integral aim of Catholic education, but that it deserves special consideration in this COVID-era of schooling. Implicit within each challenge recognized by our participants were the struggles of students trying to find connection, meaning, and learning in a context defined by disconnect, uncertainty, and stagnation. As Catholic school educators, we agree with Nuzzi (2012) that our connection to the Triune God already implies a communion with others, and it is our calling to help reveal and live out this community with students in classrooms. We hope that Catholic school leaders will afford teachers the support, time, and space for intentionally building community in their classroom by sheltering them from the pressures of a singular focus on academic achievement.

Finally, our findings highlight a human need for connection and community that extends beyond students in Catholic schools and includes the teachers who give so much to them, especially during this COVID-19 era of schooling. As seen in other research (Stillman et al., 2019), the culture circles in this study provided our participants with spaces to explore common challenges and collectively craft responsive, equity-oriented practices. Importantly, they also afforded teachers opportunities to connect personally, to share their worries and stress around teaching through a pandemic, and to encourage one another in faith and love. We echo the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) as well as Catholic education scholars (Nuzzi, 2012) in their call for regular spaces in which Catholic school teachers can collaboratively reflect with one another. Moreover, as our teachers continue to extend themselves during this time of COVID-era schooling, we urge our Catholic schools to also consider **teachers' relationships of mind, by kinship, and of place by offering them intentional spaces for the** spiritual and socioemotional healing and rejuvenation needed to persist and thrive in their vocation.

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