

FOSTERING REFLECTIVE TEACHERS IN A GLOBALIZED AGE

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Abstract

Religious education leadership must be ever mindful of nurturing reflective teachers who are able to teach responsively within their parish context in an environment of globalization. In far too many parishes teachers function as ‘curriculum delivery service workers’ without thorough consideration of unique contextual dynamics, questions, and operative socio-cultural assumptions in the parish. This essay argues that making appropriate contextually responsive decisions requires teachers to be reflective about their practice. Conceptual dimensions for fostering reflective teaching practices are explored. Based on these dimensions, intentional and systematic ways for teachers to engage in reflective practices are envisioned as a basis for ongoing teacher formation.

INTRODUCTION

Religious education leadership today must be mindful of nurturing reflective teachers who are able to teach and engage others in contextually responsive ways. This essay proposes refocusing how persons are formed in and for their teaching ministry. Current practices in teacher formation seem to fall short of assisting teachers to attend to the many cultural assumptions, social influences, and contextual dynamics they face in their ongoing ministry in the parish. Other models of teacher formation must be envisioned that take account of adults as life-long learners and actually engage teachers in reflection across their life and ministry as teachers. As Groome (1991) speaks of the reflective aspect to the movements of shared praxis, this essay’s primary concern is upon the reflective aspect of teacher formation processes that prepare teachers to engage in those reflective movements with learners. An ongoing process of teacher reflection readies us to make creative changes in our ability to understand the impact of the Christian gospel and tradition in our lives and teaching practice. This essay explores dimensions of reflective practice through conceptual foundations and what it may mean to embrace and foster reflective teaching practices for adult teachers in the parish.

Why should we foster ongoing reflective teaching practices? As one turns on the television, picks up the newspaper, or surfs the Internet, one encounters forces, positive and negative, within the global village that touch our lives and those of the faithful. In a globalizing environment people have a greater sense of a new world society via changes in information technology and global linkages. People have a growing awareness that ‘local and global events’ are ‘more and more intertwined’ which promotes a sense of the world as ‘a single place’ (Lechner and Boli 2000, 1-3). Persons within parish communities face social controversies and challenges specific to their own local context yet connected to global concerns and issues. The forces of a wider globalizing society are always at work informing and competing in the formation of adults in our parishes. Questions are raised and the contested forces of the global village challenge in each of us our sense of place as persons, families, and local communities in the world. Amidst such forces, we are called to interpret them and then consciously and

creatively witness to our faith at the local parish level. Sometimes these questions are never heard or voiced in a parish educational setting. I do not speculate upon the various reasons why they are not heard, but I do question whether or not current teacher formation processes prepare adult teachers to engage them as they arise.

It could be argued that teacher formation which fosters reflective teaching practices would better prepare teachers to confront these questions and forces by knowing what the issues are, have a sense of their own beliefs about them, understand the ways others see the issues, and how the Church has both historically and presently sought to appraise the issues theologically. In reflecting on our teaching practices we explore not only 'what' we know, but also 'how' we have come to know it and 'why' it is important in this place and time. Seymour, Crain, and Crockett's (1993) image of teachers as 'interpreters among interpreters' is an apt one. As interpreters, teachers must have an ability to discern, acknowledge and engage important questions for themselves as well as with others. This interchange of active ongoing interpretation among teachers and learners must consciously foreground how the context of one's learning shapes the questions we find ourselves asking or not asking. Growing in one's interpretive skills to 'read' one's own life, one's teaching practice, the lives of others, the faith tradition, life in society and culture, and other important aspects of living in a globalizing age involves work (Veling 1998, 199-201). Without heightened reflective interpretive skills on the teacher's part, the faith one attempts to communicate may not speak as vitally to others as needed. Enabling teachers through the practice of reflective teaching to embrace the presence of these questioning undercurrents or interpretive frameworks in the lay faithful is vital to our endeavors of Christian education. This involves a re-consideration of what is fundamental in the formation of teachers.

A PROBLEMATIC SCENARIO – ADULT FORMATION OF CATECHISTS

For nearly ten years I ministered as a parish catechetical leader. Each year, as in many Catholic parishes, there is a great deal of energy spent in the late summer to recruit teachers for parish education programs. In courting teachers, new and old, deals are made and the year begins. With teachers recruited and assigned, seasonal attention is given to their orientation and personal development after books are handed them. In the best of parishes teacher enrichment and certification classes are made available to them in an ongoing way at the parish and diocesan level. The parish coordinator, often swamped by other administrative details, is happy that something is available for them. Attendance in these courses is strongly encouraged, yet remains strictly voluntary. He or she recognizes that such courses demand a great commitment from the average volunteer teacher. When placed alongside the teaching commitment they make to the parish, it is likely few are able to fully participate in them. As to the courses many receive, it is problematic that they too often cram copious amounts of doctrinal and pedagogical information into a very short amount of learning time as if this is the only window of opportunity for learning.

I have had reason to reflect on this problematic annual cycle of recruitment and formation often. I began to question some of the operative assumptions I had about religious education teachers. First, these adult volunteer teachers were valued foremost for an educational service they provided and delivered to others in the parish. This displaces an active focus upon their

own personal faith development as adults and cultivating their identity and expertise as Christian education teachers. Second, seen in this way teachers function as ‘curriculum delivery service workers,’ a fitting image used by Ginsburg and Clift (1990) in their critique of how teacher education institutions were shaping new teachers. Teachers are expected to pass along the tradition which has been given to them and which is now organized neatly in a curriculum. For a variety of reasons (e.g. fear, inadequacy, ignorance, apathy, lack of self-permission, etc.) teachers may fail to take on some of their own difficult and meaningful questions or those raised in the learning environment by others. Often teachers are alone and when things happen in their ministry that puzzle them, few persons are around to truly listen to them and explore why things happened as they did.

As leaders, too often we fail to recognize the benefit of spending intentional quality time in conversation with those who teach in our parish programs. While working in a parish, a 5th grade volunteer teacher assigned to teach sacraments came to me expressing concerns. He felt tied to the text and was concerned that the curriculum lacked an appropriate world-view. In his view it did little to engage young people in issues like poverty, hunger, racism, and consumerism. This teacher volunteered because he wanted to make a difference in the lives of young people and help them see how a greater knowledge of their Christian faith is important in making choices affecting these issues today. After some extensive conversation, it was evident to me that this teacher needed additional help to see theological connections between living a sacramental life and these issues of global concern. We explored together how these issues became important to him, the persons and events connected to the Jesuit Volunteer Corp which formed his appreciation for them, what sense the upper white middle class young people in his class already had of these issues, and how they have been shaped in an understanding of them. Over time he was able to make better theological connections with these issues and incorporate more effectively a sharing of his own personal story. His ownership of the curriculum, his methodology and an appropriation of sacraments with these 5th graders grew extensively that year.

As a parish religious education leader, I wondered how failing to have these conversations would have left this group of 5th graders untouched by his gifts and story. Assisting teachers to surface their questions, faith concerns, or problems faced in their teaching practice and reflect upon them is a vital link in promoting their individual religious growth and expertise as Christian religious educators. How does our failure as religious education leaders to draw out these questions, concerns, and problems of practice among teachers impact their ability to share faith with others? Teacher formation must take more seriously the account of daily life, the specific contexts in which we live, and one’s ongoing practice as a Christian religious education teacher. In order for teachers to be aware of local and global forces that shape the learning environment, teachers themselves must be critically conscious of their own actions, past and present, to be able to interpret, articulate, and clarify the perspectives they hold and live in practice. Supported by educational theorists, religious education leaders may gain insight from those who help foster an understanding of reflective teaching practices.

DIMENSIONS FOR A REFLECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICE

Some key theorists help us conceptualize and understand the various dimensions of a

reflective teaching practice. A reflective teaching practice has two important dimensions for consideration: The first dimension is that of a 'other-centered' practice. In the practice of teaching one engages others in reflective and critical thinking about their lives in light of the gospel tradition. Teachers have a role to nurture and appropriately challenge both individuals and communities in appropriating the tradition and making conscious decisions to live their faith. In light of our gospel tradition, as religious education teachers we are called to question and analyze the validity of concepts, beliefs, feelings, or actions being communicated by other persons, in written or artistic media, or in life and cultural events. This 'other-centered' dimension is typically the one most often stressed among religious educators who care to form others in faith. Yet, how can teachers grow in their ability to engage others in expressing their experiences of life and faith in a reflective and critical way if we do not tend to their own critical consciousness and reflective abilities? A key to engaging others in critical thinking and reflection is to model it oneself. This is at the heart of the second dimension and the primary focus for the remainder of this essay in fostering reflective teaching practices.

The second dimension is 'subject-centered.' The subject-agent is the teacher himself or herself who is asked to reflect on their own assumptions that guide and illuminate their own teaching practices. Stephen Brookfield says, "We are our assumptions" for they give meaning to who we are and what we do (1997, 17). Knowledge of the assumptions that give our lives meaning and guide us in daily decisions is important for teachers to articulate over time. As I teach and witness to my faith I will be challenged to engage in a self-reflection on my own personal assumptions brought to my teaching. My beliefs, values, feelings, and actions are the subject of self-scrutiny in light of this particular community of faith and the wider faith tradition. The benefit of emphasizing a need for such self-reflective practice is the ability to articulate how one integrates one's own passions, beliefs, values, and judgments into one's ministry as a teacher.

For example, when asked what I believe about God it may be my fundamental conviction that God is an all-loving Father and Mother who is in relationship to us and deeply cares for us. In a reflection upon my life and practice of teaching how does this conviction get appropriated? Slighting others or ignoring their questions in a learning setting would fail to communicate the conviction that each person's concerns are cared for as God cares for them. Unless we are in conversation with learners and peers we may never know how our convictions get appropriated and lived out. This self-reflective process on the assumptions that illumine our practice is irreducibly a social one. It is not something we do alone. It requires interaction and input from others in our community to uncover these assumptions for ourselves.

Our teaching reflects who we are and the assumptions we hold. The process of reflection could begin with a reflection upon a particular teaching practice itself. It could open up the problems and joys we face in our daily teaching practice. Reflecting upon these theologically may be another way to explore and articulate the assumptions that guide our lives. A benefit of beginning with a reflection upon practice is the opportunity to gain a better understanding not only of one's assumptions but one's own approach to religious education. Seymour (1997) insightfully maps various approaches to Christian education and begins to question the foundational assumptions valued within these approaches with respect to the teacher, the learner, the process of education, the context, and the goals of education. In a reflection upon practice, a teacher will likely be able to identify and articulate their own approach to religious education.

Various approaches to religious education and the teaching practices used in conjunction with them are imbued with choices of power. Reflecting on one's practice with a better knowledge of one's approach helps the teacher come to a greater understanding of their gifts as well as limitations. This is particularly when in a particular parish context another approach to community learning is necessary or is held up as the ideal. When assumptions that guide our individual practice differ from those held by the community or embraced by its leadership, articulating the differences assists both individual teachers and communities to become more sensitive to how contextual issues and questions are handled.

A benefit of this subject-centered reflective practice is the ability for individual teachers to take greater responsibility for their own faith development, education, and growth as a teacher. Teacher development then at the parish level is less the jurisdiction of individuals in parish or diocesan leadership deciding what teachers need, but more a shared and collaborative decision by teachers of the parish seeking to grow in their knowledge as Christian educators and persons of faith. It is contextually sensitive and responsive to teacher and learner needs.

SOME KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Many write about the topic of reflection and its impact on teaching practice. The scholars selected here advance some key ideas for consideration by religious education leadership.

John Dewey: In educational literature John Dewey is often cited as a seminal thinker on the subject of reflection. In *How We Think*, Dewey argues that a difference exists between reflective thinking and other kinds of thought that may be categorized as non-reflective. Dewey defines 'reflective' thought as: "Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1997, 6). Often in life, as in teaching, we can perceive a situation and act thoughtfully, yet in Dewey's view we do so non-reflectively. It is not reflective if our response to the situation is based out of habit or we take the situation and its meaning for granted. Thoughtful teaching may get us through dilemmas faced in practice, but it fails to inquire into the grounds of why the situation presents itself as a dilemma in the first place.

When facing a 'felt difficulty,' a key experience for Dewey's problem-solving framework, we suspend judgment for a time to explore and study the context of the situation. The situation must be defined in some detail in order to respond to it. This time of exploration is both intentional and sustained. It would take into account perspectives of both learners and teachers. It would be contextually explorative. It involves a careful study of persons, beliefs, and practices that have contributed to the situation. It is a careful consideration of not only what we believe, but also how we have come to know it or the grounds supporting those beliefs or practices. An 'active, persistent, and careful consideration' of a belief or practice requires us to inquire into that belief or practice in a 'systematic and intentional way' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990, 3). The inquiry is *systematic* in that we take steps to gather and record information that assists us in reflecting upon our teaching practices. It is *intentional* in that it is a planned activity rather than spontaneous. As with the 5th grade sacrament teacher, a systematic and intentional conversation over one's teaching ministry becomes a supple source for ongoing adult formation of teachers. Leadership is challenged to make allowances in teaching schedules to provide for such intentional and regular conversation that is systematic in

scope.

When teachers in the parish look to experienced peers or parish leaders and ask, “How should I deal with this situation or what can I do?” the opportunity to initiate regular conversation about one’s practice can begin. Religious education leadership is sometimes at fault for providing ‘answers’ for volunteer teachers too quick which only perpetuates the teacher’s role as a ‘curriculum delivery service worker.’ The answer many teachers get is often abstracted from the social context of the learning situation and the learners involved. It is compounded when the difficulties of the teaching situation are located foremost with the learners and their actions, while the perspectives of the teacher and their teaching beliefs and styles go unquestioned in the situation. Answering these questions without a serious consideration of the context of the parish, the culture in which it is embedded, the lives of learners, and one’s own experiences and beliefs as a teacher may lead to a teaching response solution which is less than desirable contextually.

When teachers are thoughtful enough to come forward to parish leadership seeking some solution to a problem or question, leadership must be prepared to engage in a Deweyan-like process of inquiry. It is important to gather from Dewey that ‘reflective’ teaching requires a stance of protracted inquiry and curiosity in the face of a problem. This stance of inquiry is akin to Freire’s notion of epistemological curiosity and his concerns in promoting teacher research (1998, 35). By advancing a notion of reflection itself, Dewey’s work advances the idea to teacher educators that not all ‘thought-full’ teaching would or can be considered reflective and only the latter assists teachers to learn from their own experiences and practices as a teacher.

Donald Schön: Another scholar, well cited in educational literature, who has advanced our understanding of reflection is the work of Donald Schön (1983; 1987). Teaching requires various reflective abilities. Schön contributes to our understanding of reflective practice by highlighting various temporal moments. Reflection on one’s teaching happens before, after, and in the midst of one’s teaching. A systematic and intentional inquiry takes each of these reflective moments into consideration. Schön advances the idea that teachers, like other practitioners, reflect both in and on action.

Reflection-in-action suggests how teachers reflectively frame and solve problems on the spot while they are engaged with learners. This reflective process is not only a reflection on the problem itself, but on one’s spontaneous ways of thinking and acting in the midst of teaching that leads one to take certain actions. Schön’s reflection-in-action speaks of a reflective activity hinging on an experience of surprise or novelty. ‘Surprise’ is notably positive language against the Deweyan ‘problem’ or ‘difficulty.’ The reflective response made can be very rapid or offered only with quick pause. Fostering reflective practice by having volunteer teachers take mental note of these surprises or moments of quick reflection can be fruitful for later discussion.

Reflection-on-action is that reflective activity that occurs before or after an action. This reflection can span mere minutes to hours, days, weeks, and months. The initial ‘surprise’ or problem can lead to an extended reflection. This is not merely an intellectual exercise, but one which re-informs our action and whole practice as teachers.

When religious education leadership desires to foster a reflection in and on practice as Schön describes, conversation about one’s teaching practices, beliefs, values, and assumptions not only begin but remain ongoing. It is a ‘sustained conversation’ much in the way that Hollingsworth (1994) and Regan (Forthcoming) speak of it. Griffiths and Tann (1992) suggest

how this ongoing conversation over practice involves activity of review, research, and re-theorizing.

While leadership may not see volunteer teachers immediately engaged in theorizing about one's own practice, it is certainly possible that activities of extended review on one's practice will lead to some heightened awareness of their teaching as being theologically and educationally grounded. For this to happen structures within the parish must facilitate and allow a teacher to balance the time they are asked to teach with time spent reflecting on their practice in a meaningful and intentional manner. Many new teachers are often overwhelmed in the beginning of their teaching ministry for many things happen in a short amount of time while teaching. To dwell on the complexity of teaching will only scare potential volunteers away. Yet I believe that if we assist teachers to systematically evaluate and inquire into their own practice, their identity and development as Christian teachers can be enhanced. Catechetical leaders valuing Schön's insight would find greater value in stressing the importance of the periods of preparation prior to teaching and the evaluation after one's teaching which are key to the learning reflection process. A drawback for many leaders is that this is a time-consuming process. Yet I believe if we value teachers as something more than curriculum delivery service workers, we will find value in this time investment which enhances spiritual growth of teachers and draws teachers into meaningful contact with each other and the parish curriculum. Furthermore, a sustained reflective examination on one's practices can lead to an ever-deepening re-appreciation and re-appropriation of gospel values in one's teaching.

Jack Mezirow and Stephen Brookfield: The conceptual foundations for a practice of reflective teaching are also advanced by conversation with adult educators Mezirow and Brookfield. Their work is helpful to religious education leaders who desire to develop concrete approaches and engage in systematic reflective teaching practices.

They carefully delimit an understanding of reflection that assists us in differentiating the kinds of questions we ask about our teaching practices. Not unlike the Deweyan problem or Schon's surprise, Mezirow (1991; 1998) suggests we resort to 'reflection' when we run into a disorienting dilemma. He is concerned with the ways we respond reflectively to a dilemma. He sets out three possibilities, one of which he reserves the title of 'critical reflection.'

Mezirow delimits 'critical reflection' to a reflection on the assumptions, presuppositions or *premises* supporting our beliefs. This premise reflection means becoming aware of *why* we perceive, think, feel, or act as we do. Critical reflection uncovers the tacit assumptions that prior learning has shaped. Distinguished from 'critical reflection' are two other forms of reflection. They are a reflection on *content* and on *process*. Content reflection involves reflecting on *what* we perceive, think, feel, or act upon. Process reflection examines *how* we perform these functions of perceiving, thinking, feeling, or acting and our effectiveness in performing them. Content and process reflection involves dynamics in which our specific beliefs, what Mezirow calls 'meaning schemes,' are actually changed. Premise reflection is when our belief systems themselves are transformed and become more fully developed. Brookfield (1995), who draws upon Mezirow's distinctions defining critical reflection, makes clear that because reflection is not 'critical' does not mean that it is unimportant or unnecessary to a reflective practice. Teachers need to reflect upon content, process, and premise levels.

This assumption exploring reflective process is a hermeneutical one. For example, when a person in church leadership makes a declarative statement, it is natural for us as teachers to try and understand at depth the *content* of the statement. We evaluate the way in which words are being defined and used and what practices are included or excluded, acceptable or non-acceptable. We also critique *process*. How did they come to this position? What is the evolution of their beliefs on this matter such that we can better appreciate what is being declared? We also appraise the statement on the basis of *premise*. Why is such a statement

made? What socio-cultural, epistemic, and psychological factors contribute to it being pronounced here in this time and place? Often times it is a difficult and time-consuming task but essential if one hopes to gain fuller appreciation of the other person and what is being said. The difficulty is compounded because as we try to understand the other person, we must also engage in a self-reflective process trying to understand how the content of the other differs from our own, the process that leads to our own understanding, and the premises on which they are based. Each of these dimensions of content, process, and premise are important in the hermeneutical investigation.

As teacher-agent-subjects our ability to perceive, think, feel and act may be influenced by errors in *content* or *process* as well as distortions based on *premises* that have resulted from prior learning. Mezirow proposes that our habitual frames of reference, what he calls ‘meaning perspectives,’ are transformed through a critically reflective assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, and psychic distortions. Epistemic distortions have to do with the nature and use of knowledge. Socio-cultural distortions have to do with those taken-for-granted belief systems pertaining to prevailing power and social relationships often legitimized by institutions. Psychological distortions have to do with those individual presuppositions that generate unwarranted personal anxiety and impede us from taking action in the face of dilemmas.

Mezirow’s distinctions on reflection help religious education leaders in their role as teacher educators to assist teachers in assessing the kinds of reflective questions they ask. They also serve teachers in searching for the appropriate balance to content, process, and premise reflection in a given teaching setting. Addressing a particular problem of practice may require a specific type of reflection (i.e. content, process, or premise) to aid the teacher in their growth and understanding of the context in which they practice their teaching ministry.

In *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* Brookfield (1995) refines further what Mezirow’s schema means for teachers in the process of examining assumptions and improving their practice. He adds that reflection becomes ‘critical’ for teachers when it has two purposes: first, it illuminates considerations of power that undergird, frame, and distort educational processes and interactions; second, it uncovers hegemonic assumptions we think are guiding our best interests but which actually work against us in the long term. Power is the central issue. The varied social relations teachers find themselves in are spotlighted. In critical pedagogy socio-cultural and epistemic distortions related to teachers, teaching, parishes and schools are of first concern.

The benefit of Brookfield’s insight for parish religious education teachers is a greater understanding of one’s own teaching context and operative relationships of power. For example, what is the commitment of the parish organization and its leadership to its educational mission? How is this manifested? Are there other bureaucratic, economic, political, linguistic, or ecclesial factors shaping religious education in the parish? A teacher, considering the frameworks of power undergirding the parish’s educational mission, may not only recognize how their role is vested within structures of authority, but will hopefully learn to act responsibly and responsively within it. Exploring these organizational, institutional and culturally bound factors affecting education will assist teachers in a globalizing age to make meaningful, just, and caring curricular decisions.

Highlighting Schön’s schema, I would argue that most questions teachers ask when making complex reflective decisions *in* action are often related to content or process reflection. When we reflect *on* practice it is likely further content or process reflection continues, but the possibilities of premise reflection opens up. In reflecting on practice it is conceivable an individual teacher or group of teachers may spend inordinate amounts of time engaged in content

or process reflection without adequate attention to questions related to premise. If we truly desire to teach in contextually responsive ways within this globalizing era and see the social transformation of our parish communities, ample attention needs to be given to premise reflection and the various premise distortions applicable to a teacher's context. Each of these levels of reflection are functionally important and provide a basis for strategizing and distinguishing different kinds of reflective activity within them. It goes without saying that such intentional and systematic reflective activity requires time and creating a hospitable, just, and safe space. Seymour and his associates (1993) as well as Parker Palmer (1983; 1998) offer helpful and extended reflection for leadership on creating such space.

EMBRACING WAYS TO FOSTER REFLECTIVE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS

Having established a foundation upon which to understand the dimensions of a systematic and intentional reflective teaching practice, leaders in parish ministry (e.g. C/DRE, pastoral associates, pastors) must be given tools to foster these practices. Religious education leaders who try their best to model a reflective practice in their own ministry will likely be more successful in drawing others into this type of teacher formation process.

Brookfield (1995) offers four important lenses for our consideration: first, we investigate our own autobiographies as teachers. Reflecting on our own personal experiences is a fundamental source of uncovering our assumptions that inform and guide our teaching practice; second, we turn to our student-learners in dialogical fashion to get their perspectives on our teaching; Learners are interpreters too and through their eyes and feedback we are able to examine and study our own practice; third, reading religious education literature can provide multiple interpretations which help us view and articulate our own assumptions. This literature can both affirm and call our practice into question; fourth, inviting colleagues to view our teaching and engaging collaboratively with them in sustained conversation can surface assumptions guiding our practice.

Each of these four lenses requires us as religious educators to engage in protracted contemplative moments balanced by mature and healthy conversation with other learners and teachers. How might teacher formation fostering reflective practice in the parish look different if these four lenses were creatively used?

Autobiography: Reflecting with others on our own life experiences and our autobiography of faith is a valuable resource for teachers. We not only learn reflectively from them but also are able to use our own stories of faith in our teaching. One's autobiography tells the story of a rich matrix of persons and events, which have shaped one's faith. It can be a rich source for theological reflection and discussion, exploring the goals we bring to our approach to religious education, the views we hold of the community of faith and learners, and the hopes we have for teaching in its midst. Encouraging teachers to keep journals of their life and faith experiences can be a helpful autobiographical tool for gaining insight into the assumptions that guide practice.

Dialog with Student-Learners: Few of us as teachers have an opportunity to hear what others have to say about our teaching and our ability to share faith. Evaluations do not go far enough for it is a conversation too often held at the end of a course or series. Are we willing to

regularly listen to what student-learners have seen in us that communicates faith to them? What hinders this communication? What in our teaching practice supports or hinders the message we are trying to communicate? In religious education an ongoing conversation like this in the midst of our teaching doesn't happen.

Literature Supporting Christian Education: Having worked in the parish and often feeling overworked, I unfortunately found that reading was sacrificed in the face of administrative demands. For volunteer teachers reading is difficult and often non-existent because their time is consumed with expected weekly demands of teaching while juggling other commitments. Christian education literature allows us to imagine and create a vision that stretches us beyond the boundaries of our current practice. What time do we spend enriching and deepening our knowledge of the many subjects that impact our ability to communicate faith effectively? One may ask, as Veling does, what sort of books does one need to read to effectively connect faith and life (1998, 196)? Is our reading broad enough to give us the ability to converse with the diversity of learners we teach? The literature base needed may expand beyond boundaries associated with conventional theological or religious education resources. What do we learn from this literature about our self and our teaching practice? What questions does it raise in our autobiography of faith? How does it challenge the way we presently engage with learners or our peers in dialog? If our teaching practice is at all unsettled by what we are reading, are we mature enough to explore why that is the case?

Sharing with Colleagues: Many of us end up teaching alone and never have the benefit of peers to observe our teaching. Apart from team teaching opportunities, in what ways are we able to gather intentionally in conversation with our peers to talk about our teaching experiences? I can imagine that sustaining adult conversation around our teaching practices would likely raise a host of concerns about beliefs, values, actions, doctrine, methodology, and more. Does the parish support a hospitable, just, safe and non-judgmental environment for this type of conversation to happen? This requires a mutual openness on the part of leadership and teachers. It requires a community who cares for each adult and is committed to the growth of each adult in the parish. Community must be valued. It requires developing relationships of trust. As maturing adults, it requires nurturing confidence in teachers so those involved in sharing can hear and accept affirmation or challenges regarding their teaching practices.

CONCLUSION

Fostering intentional and systematic ways for teachers to reflect upon their practice is needed in these quickly changing times. Nurturing reflective teachers will assist our faith communities in facing new questions and issues as we interact with others across the globe. Teachers will be more able to respond to new questions and challenges if they are alert to their own questions and biases, as well as those confronting them within their teaching and socio-cultural context. This poses great challenges for those in parish leadership.

Leadership needs to work with teachers in new ways to examine the problems faced in the church today. This means accepting the challenges society poses to those professing a Christian faith in an inherently pluralistic globalizing society. Our classrooms and parishes are not insulated environments. They are greatly influenced by the forces in the world around them. Religious education teachers regularly encounter these forces and must be prepared to engage them. Teacher formation too often has had a narrow emphasis on the processes occurring within the classroom or the content needed to be competent there. Fostering reflective teaching practices embraces a vision

of ongoing formation. It enables teachers to see themselves and the learners they work with as situated within a specific context in our world and embracing the questions as linked to a larger world order where their individual and communal actions are felt and noticed.

Teachers may benefit well from a course that deepens their knowledge of faith doctrine or pedagogy, but as this essay has argued further attention needs to be given to uncovering and discovering the depth of faith belief structures which supporting one's teaching practice and witness. Though conversation in the coffee nook can help us gain insight at times into our beliefs and teaching practices, the places, times, and spaces we engage in this conversation must be set apart. It requires a sustained conversation and must be intentional. Again, this surmounts challenges for parish leadership and communities. It requires planning on behalf of parish leadership to create the time and space for intentional conversation to happen. Being intentional means not sacrificing the place and value of adult formation work in competition with a teacher's time in service to the community. It requires a wholehearted commitment to adult formation. Engaging in such reflective practice happens across the whole of one's teaching ministry. It is a sustained conversation. It is not limited to brief and sparse moments of reflection on practice typical of some parish and diocesan teacher formation courses currently offered. Being intentional about reflecting on practice has the potential to positively impact the parish's corporate ability to share faith with its members because teachers grow in knowledge and awareness of their place in the world.

This is also a conversation that is systematic. The experiences of one's teaching are brought out in a planned fashion using a variety of formats. Sharing autobiographies, dialog with learners, insights from literature, and exploring the comments from learner and peers all help us to gain better insight into the assumptions which guide our practice. As something systematic it is fueled by an inquiry into the problems of practice as well as the joys and surprises. It is systematic in another way. The reflection on our practice and experiences is at once an exploration at each of the levels of content, process, and premise reflection as Mezirow describes. With an understanding of each of these levels, the reflection we engage in with others will hopefully transform one's faith life and teaching and better appropriate the contextual challenges faced in a globalizing age.

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