

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO EDUCATE A CHILD: PANDEMIC AND CATHOLIC EDUCATION

FR. RANDY J.C. ODCHIGUE

This article reflects on the disruption of COVID-19 on education. At the outset, the paper establishes the syndemicity of COVID-19 and describes how this impacted the many facets of life among families and individuals. Paradigm change, creative adaptation and agile implementation are terms that describe how educational institutions struggle to cope with the disruption. This contribution describes the aforementioned strategies with an eye not only on the advantages of digital and other modalities of learning but also of the challenges these new learning paradigms bring – for example - digital divide, mental health issues and integrities of outcomes. Moreover, beyond a description of how education has tried to grapple with the new normal, this paper attempts to provide impulses of a specifically Catholic approach to education first by providing a critical appraisal of the dynamics of how various agencies are handling this syndemic and second by drawing from the resources of the Catholic social teaching tradition in proposing an incipient approach towards a framework of education in the new normal. The article concludes by pointing out the importance of care and relationality as indispensable Christian values that may help educators, learners and other stakeholders navigate the challenges of COVID-19 as the Christian community continues its evangelizing mission through education.

PANDEMIC CONTEXT

“Life is difficult.”¹ So begins M. Scott Peck in his book on the psychology of love whose title, *The Road Less Travelled*, takes its inspiration from Robert Frost. Both references are uncanny when we reflect on the crossroad where Catholic education finds itself today. Life is difficult for everyone as no one is spared from the effects of COVID-19. The pandemic has disrupted the global and local economy and societal life in its totality. In Catholic schools, it has rendered plans moot and outcomes academic. COVID 19 has placed timelines off-tangent. Financial targets are missed, and growth projections are undermined. The reference to Frost brings into mind the choice of the road less traveled that has made all the difference in the world. Beyond it being a paean for the assertive exercise of freedom, it highlights every possible pressure that is brought to bear on education to choose how this cultural and societal process will take shape during these most trying times.

COVID-19 AS SYNDEMIC

The COVID-19 situation is multifarious and multifaceted. Dr. Richard Horton, the chief editor of the leading medical journal *The Lancet* observes that SARS-CoV-2 and other diseases are concentrated in certain social groupings defined according to disparities in society. Against the backdrop of socio-economic inequality, the effects of COVID 19 are exacerbated. It is in this context that Horton calls COVID-19 not a pandemic but a syndemic.² To say that SARS-CoV-2 is syndemic is to problematize the situation and

¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 12.

² Richard Horton, “Offline: Covid-19 is not a pandemic,” *The Lancet* 396 (September 2020): 874.

to work out solutions with the awareness that we cannot and should not view COVID-19 in isolation from the economic, social, cultural, and political contexts.³ Without the above-mentioned frame of mind, solutions can become one-track and oversimplified.⁴ For example, the narrative of "flattening the curve" is hackneyed and can easily slide into an attempt to flatten the jagged surfaces upon which the syndemic is experienced by people situated across different geographies, diverse socio-political persuasions, and uneven economic-cultural locations. A cursory look at the situation, one can immediately surmise that the poor, the disenfranchised and the vulnerable are disproportionately affected by this syndemic. Horton contends that to see COVID-19 as syndemic is to be able to stress the social milieu of the disease and this means that society has to acknowledge that a purely biomedical approach will not be successful: "Approaching COVID-19 as a syndemic will invite a larger vision, one encompassing education, employment, housing, food, and environment."⁵ What of education? Aside from the already much discussed and debated issues on timeliness, access and quality in public education, there is that least talked about the question of Catholic private education.

BEYOND SURVIVING

Catholic education as it is even before the syndemic is already under stress. The government's implementation of free education, while purporting to provide access to the underserved, has impacted Catholic education in terms of

³ See, Merill Singer, "Syndemics and the biosocial conception of health," *The Lancet* 389 (March 2017): 941-950.

⁴ See, Kristin Hedges and Gideon Lasco, "Medical Populism and COVID-19 Testing," *Open Anthropological Research* 1 (2021): 73-86, 76-78.

⁵ Richard Horton, "Offline: Covid-19 is not a pandemic," 874. From here on, I will use the term "syndemic" rather than "pandemic" in order to stress the social milieu of the disease and the need for a comprehensive response to it.

enrolment and teacher migration. While government support like PEAC subsidy⁶ has provided some support for students in Catholic basic education, the provisions in RA 10931 (Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Law)⁷ have yet to see better implementation.

The COVID-19 syndemic has exacerbated an already uneven playing field to the point that as of September 14, 2020, 865 private schools have suspended operations this school year affecting 58,327 learners and 4,488 teachers.⁸ While not many Catholic schools have ceased operations, anecdotal reports mention that most Catholic schools only have an intake enrolment of about 60% or less. Tuition dependent learning institutions like Catholic schools, which are already under stress before COVID, take a second blow with the decrease of enrolment during COVID. This decrease may be accounted for by different factors. Among them may be that the enrollees of medium to small parochial or mission schools come from families whose sources of income are affected by the severe lockdown and community quarantine guidelines. Moreover, the necessary shift in learning modalities from F2F (face to face) to modular or digital online

⁶ PEAC - Private Education Assistance Committee is constituted to serve as trustee of the Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE), a permanent and irrevocable trust fund. The committee possesses powers and authorities enumerated under Executive Order (E.O.) No. 156, series of 1968. It implements financial subsidies to certified private schools. Currently, the subsidy for grades 7 to 10 is Php11, 000. For SHS, the amount ranges from 16,000 to 20,000 depending on the classification of the locality (urbanized or not) or school where the student was enrolled prior to Grade 11 among others. See, <https://peac.org.ph/about-peac>. Accessed, January 12, 2021.

⁷ RA 10931 is an act promoting universal access to quality tertiary education by providing for free tuition and other school fees in state universities and colleges, local universities and colleges, and state-run technical-vocational institutions, establishing the tertiary education subsidy and student loan program, and strengthening the unified student financial assistance system for tertiary education. See, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2017/08/03/republic-act-no-10931>. Accessed, January 12, 2021.

⁸ See, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/09/14/20/865-private-schools-suspend-operations-this-school-year>.

learning has brought into sharp focus social inequalities and the digital divide between families who send their kids to the wealthy Catholic universities in urban centers and the families enrolling their children in small Catholic colleges and parochial schools. Then there is that further societal and digital divide between students and pupils in Catholic private schools and those in the public education system.

Indeed, as Leah Rosen describes, COVID-19 is like an X-ray of our society⁹ that highlights the fractures, injuries of inequality, and wounds of division. Set against the syndemicity of COVID-19, the question for Catholic education's response takes on a broader field of engagement which includes but is not limited only to the administrative and organizational development perspective.

PAST STRATEGIC DRIFT

Management textbooks talk about strategic drift¹⁰ which can be defined as the gradual decline of the ability of an organization to survive because of its failure to get a handle on the situation. It results in an inability to acknowledge and respond to the shifting environment of the enterprise in which it is involved. However, with COVID-19, Catholic private schools— and I am not referring to the big universities— are faced with the situation of responding at breakneck speed against the ever-shifting ground of education context, policy, and implementation handed down by the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). There is none of any graduality

⁹ Leah Rosen, "COVID 19 is like an X-ray of Society," accessed, 13 July 2021 <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/covid-19-is-like-an-x-ray-of-society/>.

¹⁰ Ravi Sivalingam, *Strategic Management. Industry Analysis, Strategic Drift and Re-Strategizing* (Norderstedt: Grin Verlag, 2015); See also, <https://eiuPerspectives.economist.com/strategy-leadership/strategic-drift-how-hr-plans-change>. Accessed January 12, 2021.

that characterizes a "drift." There is only disruption and the urgency of making a decision to grow or to wither. Without the luxury of government assurance of continuous salary (unlike public school teachers), administrators of small Catholic schools are faced with the moral dilemma of relinquishing the mission of evangelizing young people, of giving in to the temptation of surrendering quality education in numerous parishes and mission stations, and of closing down the already hand to mouth existence of their tuition dependent institutions which results to the unemployment of their teachers and staff. Being used to the framework of financial subsidiarity, administrators are left to fend for themselves and are faced with the hard choice between suffering or surviving, or in most cases surviving despite suffering.¹¹ The familiar dilemma Catholic school administrators are confronted with is that of choosing between pursuing their Catholic mission versus the financial viability of their institutions.

From the perspective of pre-COVID curriculum and instruction, teachers and curriculum implementers are used to manageable expectations and outcomes. COVID-19 has thrown all of that out of the window! It appears that the experiences of many Catholic educators are the same all over the globe: "the chaos, uncertainty, and quarantine transformed the familiar to strange and demanded unprecedented adaptation of practice to fit a generally foreign context: remote online teaching and learning."¹² Faced with this situation, teachers do not only create and migrate class content to the digital learning platform but in doing so, those

¹¹ For reference on the principle of financial and administrative subsidiarity of parochial schools, confer, Timothy D. Uhl, "Subsidiarity and Innovation during the Pandemic," in *Journal of Catholic Education* 23 no. 1 (2020): 97-101.

¹² Keirstin Giunco, et al., "Lessons from the Field: Catholic School Educators and COVID-19," *Journal of Catholic Education* 23, no. 1 (2020): 243-267, 243.

situated in the periphery are further saddled with the additional responsibility of discerning whether their students have the digital tools and access for online remote learning. Without these, educators are forced to follow the template of the public school system utilizing take-home modules which instructional designs may not be effective in content delivery and assessment.

NEGOTIATING PARADIGMS

The above-mentioned disruptions in the areas of school management and curriculum and instruction provide the impetus to change paradigms in Catholic education during the COVID 19 syndemic.

The most obvious is the shift in content creation, modality of learning, and Catholic formation: fully online (synchronous/asynchronous), and home-based learning. The blended/flex/hybrid approaches to curriculum and instruction are only among the many options available to Catholic educators. The decisions are hinged on several considerations like: health and safety of the members of the school community; learning continuity plan that takes into account the connectivity of the students and faculty; upskilling of the faculty, students, and guardians; creation and migration of instructional content to a digital learning platform; reliability of assessment results, financial situation, and sustainability of the operations among others. This shift is easier said than done. Even for schools in urban centers and despite the availability of digital resources, online pedagogy is still a formidable task. The stakeholders of education— the teachers, students, and parents - need to “acquire online-

driven competencies in planning, implementing, and assessing the performance of their students.”¹³

While internet-based remote learning has become an essential learning modality during the syndemic in order to continue providing service to pupils and students, this paradigm shift has undeniably changed the learning process and learning experience. Students are forced to negotiate their learning in this digital terrain.

Indeed, online learning offers several benefits. Some studies contend that learners assimilate information well in online learning environments as opposed to face-to-face classes.¹⁴ It seems also that online remote learning creates a level playing field, especially for students who may have difficulty expressing themselves in a face-to-face classroom whether out of shyness or out of lack of confidence in communicating ideas in a physical classroom.¹⁵ One can also summarize the benefits of online learning under the following general headings: democratization and access of content; flexibility, and personalized engagement. Under the first heading, online learning promotes student-centered learning, wide participation, and in-depth discussions as opposed to the traditional classroom. In online platforms, students can post their comments and reflections on discussion boards without being constrained by limited F2F class hours. Students are given more control on the content of learning because they too have the same access to the same digital learning materials as with the teachers. Another benefit of online learning is

¹³ Cathy Mae Toquero, “Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Philippine Context,” *Pedagogical Research* 5 no. 4 (2020): 1-5, 3.

¹⁴ Navarro, P.; Shoemaker, J. Performance and perceptions of distance learners in cyberspace. *American Journal of Distance Education* (2000): 14, 15-35 as cited in Claudiu Coman, et al, “Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education during the Coronavirus Pandemic: Students’ Perspective,” *Sustainability* 12 (2020): 1-24, 5.

¹⁵ Coman, et al, “Online Teaching and Learning,” 5.

flexibility. In an online remote asynchronous learning modality, students learn at their own pace. They can also surf the net for further explanation, even tutorials on YouTube, and access the EBSCOHOST database, Easybib, and Turnitin for research. Students also can access platforms like Canva and Adobe Rush for better output in their performance tasks. Collaboration has become easier and more flexible with the Google Suite ecosystem, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Jitsi Meet. Online remote learning provides an opportunity for personalized learning. The learner can engage the content “anytime, anywhere.” From modifying their profiles in their Learning Management System, expressing their personal thoughts on the topics, sharing their ideas with their peers, and giving feedback in order to personalize the educational approach to the needs of the learners— all these are doable in the online environment.

In the process of adapting and negotiating with this new paradigm of teaching and learning, issues are encountered not just by administrators and teachers but especially by students. In a conference organized by the Catholic Education Association of the Philippines in 2020, Dr. N. Limbadan, a clinical psychologist, presented her findings regarding issues encountered by students as they cope with ODL (Online Distance Learning). Her research reveals that students are encountering a range of issues: on the aspect of internet access, students (and teachers) are having issues with internet connectivity and lack of resources (gadgets like laptops or tablets).¹⁶ Elsewhere, students also find it challenging to navigate different sites and platforms for different subjects with different login information and

¹⁶ Dr. Nelly Limbadan, “The Other Half of the Village: Role and Place of Schools in Raising a Child,” Unpublished lecture for CEAP Conference 2020. Accessed 16 July 2021, <https://www.ceap.org.ph/resources>.

passwords. Access to a unified platform remains a challenge.¹⁷ Learners also encounter instruction-related issues like hyper-dumping of class content without the benefit of discussion, especially in asynchronous learning. Other issues include the difficulty in using new learning platforms, the unrealistic volume of formative assessments and performance tasks, perceived lack of coaching/mentoring with complex class content and observed unsatisfactory engagement on the part of the teachers.¹⁸ The “crunch culture”¹⁹ created by this academic atmosphere appears to amplify the mental anguish of the learners. On top of the abovementioned, they also face “containment anxiety” brought about by the strict quarantine policies, lack of conducive atmosphere at home for distance learning; overlap of household chores, and academic requirements. Students also battle with being demotivated and struggle with their time management and procrastination. There is also an added sense of disconnection between the viewer and the viewed in digital platforms and e-classrooms. This distance seems to rid the viewer and the viewed of the ethical gaze that “demands” compassion and care for the other.

The struggle of negotiating between F2F and online distance learning is not only experienced by the students but also endured by the teachers who need to upgrade their skills in technology as well as write, design, or curate learning content in a way that is relevant to the context and needs of the students. All of this requires the Catholic Christian values of persistence, strength of character, and missionary

¹⁷ Keirstin Giunco, et al., “Lessons from the Field: Catholic School Educators and COVID-19,” 12.

¹⁸ Dr. Nelly Limbadan, “The Other Half of the Village: Role and Place of Schools in Raising a Child.”

¹⁹ The phrase is borrowed from the video gaming community and often used by students to describe their situation where they have to cram in order to meet the unrealistic volume of assessments, they are given without consideration of the time required to finish them or turn in a decent formative assessment output.

commitment in order for the educator to cope with this educational disruption.

The above-mentioned issues are encountered by those who have the option for online distant learning. What about those who are situated on the fringes of the “village”? Those regarded at the underside of the digital divide lack the basic tools and platform for ODL – they even lack access to the basic needs during the syndemic. Here, we are not only referring to the public school system. The parochial schools in the peripheries and the mission schools in indigenous communities are all in the same situation as with their public counterparts. They are then consigned to using modules and making do with whatever materials are available to teachers and pupils.

CRISIS, POEISIS, PHRONESIS

How then is the Catholic church going to respond to the above-mentioned challenges? Ramon Reyes contends that *poesis* and *phronesis* play important roles during crisis.²⁰ *Poesis* is a Greek term used to describe the threshold moment of action of a purposeful bringing-forth of something that transforms and continues the existence of human persons and the world. In a crisis, creativity becomes essential. Faced with the COVID-19 crisis, many private Catholic schools are pooling resources and sharing strategies through non-stop CEAP webinars, teacher training, and network consultations. All these are under the radar and forgotten in the mainstream

²⁰ Ramon Reyes, “Philosophy in a Crisis Situation,” in *Philippine Studies* 34 (1986): 219-27. “...*poesis*, or the creative role. Taking up the role of language as will-act, as will-to-meaning, the philosopher-interpreter, by way of symbol and metaphor and paradox must open up new possibilities for man in view of a world more humanly habitable, more just, more free ... the philosopher-interpreter in his poetic role must dare to say what heretofore has remained unsaid. *He must propose possibilities till now untried and perhaps considered impossible.*” (Italics mine), 224.

congressional hearings and DepEd consultations. Knowingly or not, these Catholic administrators are practicing their own versions of *phronesis*²¹ in the COVID situation and poetics of resistance against the conservative reactionary narrative of not doing anything until the situation normalizes or until a vaccine is found.

If one adopts the lens of syndemicity, the Catholic response has to move beyond the organizational development buzzwords like corporate agility or losing competitive advantage, etc. This means the Catholic educators' response has to address the question of educational equity and equality. From this perspective, the above-mentioned initiatives take on a distinct Catholic character if they are framed within the ambit of Catholic Social Teachings. In other words, "respect for the life and dignity of the human person, the call to care for family and community, the principle of solidarity in uniting the human community, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, providing persons with rights that ensure decent lives such as an education, preference for the poor, and care for all creation are principles that inform teaching and learning in Catholic schools."²² *Gravissimum educationis* reiterates the inalienable right to education which it defines as the formation of the total human person so that s/he can contribute to the flourishing of the human community and in the process, bringing the unique contribution of Catholic Christian worldview, moral values, and spirituality.²³

²¹ Ibid., 226, "...concept of *phronesis*, which connotes a sort of practical wisdom, a certain capacity to think and feel in the situation as befits the man of action." This idea is taken by Reyes from Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, v-xiii.

²² Audrey A. Friedman et al., "Looking at Catholic schools' response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching Principles," *Journal of Catholic Education* 16 (2020): 214-241, 215. Accessed 19 July 2021, https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce_covid?utm_source=digitalcommons.lmu.edu u%2Fce_covid%2F16&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages...

²³ *Gravissimum Educationis* 1 & 2.

If one reflects on the COVID-19 experience and the plethora of issues that come along with it, one realizes that almost all, if not all, can be subsumed under the theme of the value of life and the dignity of the human person. The response of the Catholic educator from the curricular to the administrative and even formative aspects of education must be informed by the pre-eminence of the value of the human person and the dignity of each human being. Concretely, this means that when faced with the lack of access and inclusive opportunity, Catholic education has to take into account in its implementation a conscious direction to provide the widest possible opportunity for educational equity and access to those who are most economically-socially disadvantaged and those who might have been impacted gravely by unjust situations during the syndemic.²⁴

Questions on equity, justice and basic human rights of the person challenge the Catholic educator to move beyond the constructivist pedagogical approach during the syndemic. Catholic schools are challenged to put forward a critical pedagogy²⁵ that forms students into participants of the social discourse, especially in relation to the right to life and health. In this time of the syndemic where people are left with limited or without income and with limited or no access to decent health care, medicine, or vaccine, “being a Catholic educator is a choice of more than what type of school to teach in, it is a choice to actively work tirelessly on behalf of the full and equitable right to life of all individuals from conception to natural death.”²⁶

²⁴ Audrey A. Friedman et al., “Looking at Catholic schools’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching Principles,” 217.

²⁵ This is related to the pedagogy “conscientização” proposed in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

²⁶ Audrey A. Friedman et al., “Looking at Catholic schools’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching Principles,” 218.

John Paul II's *Sollicitudo rei socialis* which celebrates the legacy of *Populorum progressio* faintly echoes Cardijn's see-judge-act in its treatment of the dynamics of societal progress.²⁷ The encyclical articulates the problem of progress that has left millions of people languishing in poverty without access to education, healthcare, and other basic needs while super developed countries live in excess. In the encyclical John Paul II argues that "structures of sin" continue to prevent humanity from achieving solidarity and the common good: "it is important to note therefore that a world which is divided into blocs, sustained by rigid ideologies, and in which instead of interdependence and solidarity different forms of imperialism hold sway, can only be a world subject to structures of sin. The sum total of the negative factors working against a true awareness of the universal common good, and the need to further it, gives the impression of creating, in persons and institutions, an obstacle which is difficult to overcome."²⁸

In a syndemic situation where embedded inequalities of society are fodder for some to take advantage of others, we see rampant practice of disaster capitalism where the cost of commodities from vaccines to services like RT-PCR tests and medicines have reached such levels that have become too prohibitive for those without or limited financial resources. Catholic educators have the responsibility to promote an approach of education where teaching and learning are sensitive to and are geared towards reducing societal inequalities. Critical pedagogy must help expose the dynamic

²⁷ "On the one hand it is constant, for it remains identical in its fundamental inspiration, in its "principles of reflection," in its "criteria of judgment," in its basic "directives for action," and above all in its vital link with the Gospel of the Lord. On the other hand, it is ever new, because it is subject to the necessary and opportune adaptations suggested by the changes in historical conditions and by the unceasing flow of the events which are the setting of the life of people and society." *Sollicitudo rei socialis* nr. 3.

²⁸ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* nr. 36.

of capitalist predation during disasters and have in mind the interest and welfare of the disenfranchised in society.²⁹

Through this critical pedagogy, the Catholic educator will provide the students and researchers with the tools that enable them to deconstruct some prevailing approaches to the syndemic in the Philippines. An example of this approach is medical populism which can be discerned through the presence of the following features: “simplifying the pandemic by downplaying its impacts or touting easy solutions or treatments, spectacularizing their responses to the crisis, forging divisions between the ‘people’ and dangerous ‘others’, and making medical knowledge claims to support the above.”³⁰ The dynamics of forging division is manifested by approaches of “othering” in political pronouncements through expressions like the “pasaway” (undisciplined) Filipinos which have little basis in reality and practice.³¹

This discourse in disciplining the “pasaway” appears to reinforce the government approach of securitizing the syndemic. This approach looks at COVID-19 as an existential threat and as such the government must “wage war” against an unseen enemy justifying draconian methods such as lockdowns, police checkpoints, and strict community (neighborhood) quarantine measures.³² In the same dynamic

²⁹ See also, Audrey A. Friedman et al., “Looking at Catholic schools’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching Principles,” 218-219.

³⁰ Gideon Lasco, “Medical populism and the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Global Public Health* 15 no. 10 (2020): 1417-1429, 1417.

³¹ On this point, see, Karl Hapal, “The Philippines’ COVID-19 Response: Securitising the Pandemic and Disciplining the Pasaway,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40 no. 2 (2021): 1-21. Accessed 20 July 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1868103421994261>. On the behavior of Filipinos as following health protocols, see, Imperial College London & YouGov, “How are behaviors change in response to Covid-19,” *Covid-19 Behaviour Tracker*, 2020. Accessed, August 1, 2020, https://public.tableau.com/profile/ighi#!/vizhome/ICLYouGovCovid-19Tracker_VO_3/1Specificpreventativebehaviourbycountry as cited in Hapal, “The Philippines’ COVID-19 Response,” 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

as the narrative of the “war on drugs,” the securitized discourse peddles a bifurcated society between the virtuous versus the undisciplined “pasaway.” The oppositional populist discourse purports to save the virtuous from the “pasaway,” providing the pretext for “extraordinary powers of the government and the unconditional cooperation of Filipinos.”³³ The Catholic educator is invited to exercise critical reflectivity in unmasking the prejudice behind such labels as “pasaway.” It then becomes incumbent upon Catholic education to provide opportunities for critical reflection in order that the community may become aware of the societal dynamics and push forward for the most ethical approach in building a collective response and advocacy that hold the proper government agencies accountable. In this way, the common good of the country might be attained, especially in a context of the syndemic.

Finally, an important critical narrative that desperately needs to be an integral part of the discourse on education is the way instruction and curriculum seems to have become hostage by the neo-liberal and technocratic agenda. The linchpin of R.A. 10533, “The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013,” is the ASEAN qualifications reference framework that crafted with the presupposition of the free flow of goods, investment and skilled workers. Education becomes outcomes based and market driven. During COVID for example, DepEd has sincerely tried to put together a curriculum that is implementable given the limitations of the syndemic. This was touted as the curriculum that ensures the delivery of the most essential learning competencies (MELCs). However, these competencies are tilted towards the cognitive, ensuring the uninterrupted supply of a robust human capital.³⁴ Perhaps,

³³ Ibid., 2, 3, 5.

³⁴ The rationale for the development and design of the most essential learning competencies follows the mindset that “Education cannot wait. *If learning stops, we*

Catholic education can complement this and advocate for a framework of education that accounts for the total well-being of the human person. In contemporary discourse, this framework is given expression by the application of Capability theory to education. Espoused by Amartya Sen³⁵ and Martha Nussbaum,³⁶ the Capability approach³⁷ is a broad framework that can help evaluate the well-being of persons and societies in their "functionings" and capabilities in order to arrive at a fulfilling state of being and doing. It "focuses on the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have."³⁸

BEYOND CRITIQUE: EDUCATION AS A PASTORAL HEALING MISSION

The exclusionary dynamics magnified by the experience of COVID-19 and the militaristic response to the syndemic appear to cause the fracturing of many aspects of human experience and additional injury to the vulnerable and those who are "quarantined" to certain economic and political spaces. Given this context, it remains to be a challenge for education to play a role in the healing of injuries and the straightening of these fractures. Education then must move from simple implementation to becoming a healing mission. It begins with how educators and educational

will lose human capital." (Quoted from an internal briefer of DEPED on MELCs). This is how the Department of Education interprets and implements the Sustainable Development Goal # 4 led by UNESCO on Quality Education. It however appears that the department only looks at this solely from the perspective of the human capital framework of education.

³⁵ Amartya Sen, "Editorial: Human capital and human capability," in *World Development* 25 no. 12 (1997): 1959-61.

³⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Amartya Sen, "Capability and Well-being" in *The Quality of Life*, eds. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 30-53.

³⁸ Amartya Sen, "Editorial: Human capital and human capability," 1959.

institutions use their powers of critique in order to unmask dynamics of exclusions that fracture human communities.³⁹ It is incarnated in a curricular ecosystem with a value proposition of creating relational intentionalities.⁴⁰ It also begins with how small mission and parochial schools initiate collective effort at pooling resources so that students from the most vulnerable sectors of the community are not left behind. One thinks for example how a small parochial school in Pangantucan, Bukidnon uses community radio so that students can listen in their transistor radios classes and programs that support learning and community awareness.

Relational intentionalities may also be manifested between and among catholic schools. An example would be teachers or professors from more established schools can do academic extension work in small parochial or mission schools by sharing their expertise for free either through seminars or even by handling a subject or two via online platform or through any digital interface available. In this way, schools from the peripheries can improve their overall standards without having to invest in expensive human resource requirements. In a digital implementation of education, this is possible if there is an intentional decision to relate and help everyone in the "village." This is where the catholic value of charity and inclusive learning can be manifested.

The issue of the digital divide and lack of access of many students challenge catholic schools to recast curriculum

³⁹ See Ramon Reyes, "Philosophy in a Crisis Situation," 221, "...critical reflexion in the midst of a crisis situation, by which man tries to gain or re-gain understanding of the fundamental assumptions underlying his community's manner of living, and, when the situation should require, to bring to light the ideological defenses and blind spots inherent in the community's attitudes and perspectives."

⁴⁰ Ronald D. Fussell, "Gather Us In: Building Meaningful Relationships in Catholic Schools amid a COVID-19 Context," in *Journal of Catholic Education* 23 no. 1 (2020): 149-161, 152-53.

delivery to learning solidarity. Education during COVID 19 not only lies in the choice of modalities of delivering learning outcomes. In a situation of economic, political, and digital divides, Catholic schools are called to witness hope and solidarity - be it in liturgical celebration or online or blended instruction. The value proposition of hope and in finding God in all things in the personal experience of stakeholders can be a powerful narrative.⁴¹ This can be operationalized by creating a safe space of conversation among administrators, teachers, learners, and parents. It is enriched when baby boomer administrators can learn from the genius of the millennials and Gen Z on how to make the digital platform work for learning and create opportunities of support systems to foster mental and psychological health among learners and teachers. Solidarity is incarnated when school directors will embrace the *mandatum* of Francis to go into the peripheries to encounter those in the underside of the learning divide.⁴² It becomes alive when, where possible, budget is allocated to the most disadvantaged learners.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As an African proverb says, “it takes a village to raise a child.” We appropriate this proverb into our context and say, “it takes a village to EDUCATE a child.” This means that the success of providing meaningful, relevant, and quality Catholic education during this challenging situation of the COVID syndemic hinges on the collective effort and aggregated response of all the stakeholders in education: the

⁴¹ Michael Boyle, et al, “Witness to Hope: Catholic Schools Respond to COVID-19,” in *Journal of Catholic Education* 23 no. 1 (2020): 102-112, esp. 107-10.

⁴² On the use of ‘periphery’ as a metaphor of social marginality and asymmetries in a digital and globalized world, see Pasquale Ferrara, “The Concept of Periphery in Pope Francis’ Discourse: A Religious Alternative to Globalization?” in *Religions* 6 no. 1 (2015): 42-57.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO EDUCATE A CHILD

Catholic administrators, the parishes, the basic ecclesial communities, and most importantly the families. This is the strength of our catholic faith that inspires us to be creative and responsive in this time of crisis. We also know that whichever road we take, we are confident we will pull through because after all, we are doing this mission not on our own accord but of the one who sent us to let our light shine “that they may see your good deeds, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 5:15-16)

Randy Jasper Odchigue
Fr. Saturnino Urios University
Butuan City, Mindanao, Philippines
rcodchigue@urios.edu.ph