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The Congruence of Academic Motivation and Catholic Education

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Introduction

The challenge of student motivation is one of the most critical issues in education today. Students cannot learn if they are not engaged and attentive, and teachers often complain about students who do not seem to care about learning or refuse to put in the effort required to succeed in class (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Some argue that motivation is an internal state and there is little a school or teacher can do to motivate their students if they are not already predisposed to the task or subject. However, research reports that teachers and schools do have an important influence on student motivation through their instructional practices and establishment of a positive classroom climate (e.g., Anderman & Anderman, 2010).

The educational psychology literature is replete with theories of academic motivation, including achievement goal theory (Ames & Archer, 1988), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), and flow theory (Csikszentmihályi, 1990), to name a few. Though these theories each take unique approaches to the underlying mechanisms of motivation, many of the applications and recommendations for practice stemming from the theories are overlapping. That is, there are certain principles of motivation that are considered best practices somewhat universally, according to the various theoretical frameworks. Ensuring that all students feel safe and welcomed in the classroom, holding high expectations, providing meaningful work, and appropriate levels of challenge, for example, are important recommendations for fostering student motivation regardless of theoretical framework.

All schools and teachers can benefit from adhering to the recommendations of motivation theorists to improve the potential for student motivation within their schools. However, Catholic

schools are especially well-equipped to provide positive motivational climates for students due to their mission and foundation in the Church. This paper explores aspects of Catholic education that are particularly well aligned with principles of motivation theories.

Nuzzi's (2012) Theology of Catholic Educational Leadership will be used as a theoretical framework for understanding the foundational principles of Catholic education. This framework focuses on Catholic schools being rooted in Church documents and based largely on the central mysteries of the Catholic faith: the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Paschal Mystery, and the Eucharist. This paper applies Nuzzi's theological framework to key findings of motivation theories. Each of the central mysteries of the Catholic faith will be explored below with connections to the key recommendations from various motivation theories to depict how Catholic schools are designed to foster adaptive student motivation, and to suggest ways that Catholic schools can continue to improve with regard to motivating students.

It should be noted that the connections made in this paper are suggesting ways in which the theoretical underpinnings of Catholic education invite positive applications to practice. This paper is not an empirical study of how these connections are made manifest within schools, but rather an argument that the Catholic foundation of the schools could lead to positive motivational climates. Whether or not the underlying theology of Catholic education is translated into positive motivational practices may depend on many variables, including the extent to which each school embraces its foundation in the teachings of the Church and the mysteries of the faith.

The Paschal Mystery

The Paschal Mystery is one of the better known central mysteries of the Catholic faith. The New Testament Gospels proclaim repeatedly that Jesus suffered, died, and rose again

through what is known as the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord. This mystery is commemorated primarily on Easter Sunday, although every Sunday can be thought of as a "little Easter" as the resurrection of the Lord is memorialised on this day (Nuzzi, 2012). As the Paschal Mystery of the Catholic faith recalls the dying and rising of Christ, it enables Christians to find meaning in suffering and continue to hope for the resurrection. This has significant implications for everyday life and for experiences in schools. According to the framework for a theology of Catholic educational leadership, all of the ups and downs of our daily lives are related to the death and resurrection of God (Nuzzi, 2012). In Catholic education, schools teach a paschal worldview that perceives "the cross of Jesus in the struggles and hardships of life and approaches them as Jesus did his cross, with trust and confidence in God" (Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Broken Bay, 2004). Therefore, all of the successes and failures students experience in school are different ways for them to identify with Jesus and participate in the Paschal Mystery.

Motivation research points to several ways this mystery is aligned with fostering positive motivation in Catholic schools. Achievement goal theory (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988) is a theory of motivation focused on the reasons people engage in certain activities. According to the theory, there are two main types of goal orientations; mastery goal orientation and performance goal orientation. A student who has a mastery goal orientation is motivated to learn and improve in order to truly master a task or content. A student who is performance goal oriented is more concerned with how they appear and compare to others, either trying to demonstrate their abilities (performance-approach goals) or avoiding being perceived as incompetent (performance-avoid goals). When students endorse mastery goals, they tend to exert more effort, report more intrinsic interest, persist in the case of failure, and use more effective long term learning strategies than students with performance goals (Harackiewicz,

Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Wolters, 2004). Researchers encourage teachers to foster learning environments conducive to mastery goals by de-emphasising grades and social comparison and focusing instead on the importance of improving and truly mastering the learning objectives (Ames, 1992; Anderman & Anderman, 2010).

Related to achievement goal theory, Dweck (1999) conceptualised the implicit theories of intelligence, now popularised as the construct of mindset (Dweck, 2006). She contends that people can have a fixed mindset, in which they believe that intelligence is stable, or a more adaptive growth mindset, in which they believe that intelligence is malleable and can be improved with practice. When people exhibit a growth mindset, they experience challenge and failure as cues to put forth more effort rather than as a reason to give up, knowing that they are capable of improving.

Both achievement goal theory and the construct of mindset relate to the Paschal Mystery in the way that they suggest responding to failures. The Paschal Mystery calls Catholics to see challenges and failures not to be avoided or denigrated, as would be the case with a performance-avoid goal or with a fixed, but rather as opportunities to grow in relationship with God through participating in the Paschal Mystery (Nuzzi, 2012). Just as Jesus suffered and died only to rise again, people stumble and fall only to pick themselves back up and improve. This perspective is aligned to the mentality of one who is mastery goal oriented or possessed with a growth mindset in that they display persistence and employ new strategies when they experience failure.

When students struggle in a classroom, teachers should emphasise that the challenge is an opportunity for growth and learning. Many other theories reference the importance of an appropriate level of challenge in motivating students. Vygotsky conceptualised the zone of

proximal development (ZPD) as the prime level of challenge for learning, where students can perform tasks with scaffolded assistance from a teacher that they could not perform themselves (Chaiklin, 2003). Flow theory (Csikszentmihályi, 1990) also emphasises the importance of challenge. According to this theory, students experience a state of flow, or optimal motivation, when there is a balance between high levels of challenge and high perceived ability to perform a task. Motivation, therefore, depends in part on an appropriate level of challenge and a positive response to failure, just as the Paschal Mystery affirms. In Catholic education, and indeed in all good pedagogy, even failure properly contextualised, can be a central opportunity for continued growth, a temporary pause for reckoning, followed by a new commitment and fresh insight into the challenges at hand. Great teachers model such dispositions and the life of faith can thus play an important role in supporting and affirming optimal student motivation.

The Trinity

Perhaps the clearest connection between Catholic education and motivation stems from the mystery of the Holy Trinity of the Catholic faith. The Catholic faith espouses a Trinitarian view of God as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; three persons in one God (Catholic Church 253). The mystery of the Holy Trinity is one of the best-known aspects of the Catholic faith, displayed each time the Sign of the Cross is prayed. Part of the significance of the Trinitarian worldview for Catholics is that God is characterised by relationship (Nuzzi, 2012). God is, essentially, a community of persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. Therefore, when people are in community, people are most like God. The call to community is a call to holiness.

In the Gospels, Jesus called people to live in community characterised by love: "I give you a new commandment: love one another…This is how all will know that you are my

disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34). This notion of loving, caring community, based on the mystery of the Holy Trinity, is at the heart of Catholic education. The Church maintains that Catholic schools are called to foster communities and relationships, as "education can be carried out authentically only in a relational and community context" (Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE), 2007, 12). The National Education Commission of Australia noted that Catholic schools are "aiming to be welcoming and reflective communities whose most distinctive sign is the discernment of God's presence and their spiritual life" (2015). Catholic educators agree that community is the foundation for the essence of Catholic schools (e.g., Frabutt, Holter, & Nuzzi, 2008; Moore, 2004).

Across different motivation theories, a need for community (alternatively conceptualised as belongingness, connectedness, or relatedness) is one of the most consistent recommendations to improve student motivation and classroom functioning (e.g., Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Osterman, 2000). Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 80) proposed that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships". A sense of belonging in a school environment can have a direct and positive impact on students' motivation, as perceived support increases students' beliefs in their ability to succeed (Goodenow, 1993).

With regard to specific motivational theories, Maslow (1943) included belongingness and love as the third level of his hierarchy of needs, with only basic needs of food, water, shelter, and safety listed as more essential. In this way, Maslow contended that one cannot be ideally motivated, or self-actualised, unless the need for belonging is met. Schools can meet this need through providing opportunities for students to have positive relationships with teachers and peers.

Similarly, Deci and Ryan (1985) included community, or the need for relatedness, as one of the three innate psychological needs of all people. Their theory, self-determination theory (SDT), states that motivation depends in part on the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness being met. That is, students must feel that they have some control over or choice in their educational experiences (autonomy), that they are capable of completing tasks that are appropriately challenging (competence), and that they have positive relationships with teachers and/or peers within their schools (relatedness). They conceptualise relatedness as "the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 73). The emphasis on intentional community in Catholic schools certainly aligns with the need for relatedness as students are continually affirmed that they belong to the Church and school community and that they are connected to all as children of God.

Other motivation theories also attest to the importance of community or belonging for promoting student well-being and optimal performance. In achievement goal theory, discussed above, mastery goal supportive classrooms tend to reflect positive classroom communities characterised by cooperation rather than competition and strong student-teacher relationships where students feel comfortable engaging in help-seeking behaviours (Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001). In addition to achievement goals, students also pursue social goals in school and classroom environments that include the desire to be part of a strong community (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Wentzel, 1993).

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), as evidenced by the name of the theory, places a heavy emphasis on social relationships and communities. This theory claims that learning is a result of social interactions and that motivation is enhanced when a person has a high sense of self-efficacy, or the belief that one is capable of accomplishing a task. Self-efficacy is influenced

primarily through four sources: mastery experiences (previous successes), vicarious experiences (watching peers achieve success in a task), verbal persuasion (encouragement and support from teacher or peer), and physical and emotional environments (being comfortable and relaxed in the task setting) (Bandura, 1993). While self-efficacy is an individual concept, the sources of self-efficacy are decidedly social. A positive classroom community would promote self-efficacy, and thus motivation, through opportunities for vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and a healthy physical and emotional environment for students to be comfortable and relaxed.

Taking into consideration all of the motivational theories that recommend emphasis on community, it is clear that Catholic schools are well-positioned to meet students' needs for belonging, relatedness, or community through application of the Mystery of the Trinity. The call to build intentional Christian communities of faith in Catholic schools is directly aligned with the findings of motivation research on the importance of caring school communities. Catholic schools traditionally excel at creating this community through rituals like prayer and worship, collaborative service activities, and even the uniforms and social norms that characterise the schools, in addition to promoting caring, loving environments within classrooms.

The Incarnation

The Incarnation is the mystery of the Catholic and Christian faith in which God sent His Son to become man and live for a time among humans. This doctrine is foundational to all of Christianity (Crisp, 2007). Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary and Catholics believe that Jesus was both fully God and fully man (Catholic Church 464). In the Catholic faith, His humanity brought divinity to all creation. "The Incarnation is a reminder that, as it was for Jesus, it can be for us. Humanity can be perfected as divinity," (Nuzzi, 2012, p. 5). Striving for

excellence in academics, or in any realm, is really a means of becoming like the Divine. Catholics can embrace their humanity and strive to perfect it as Jesus did. Catholic education is about growing the image of God within students and celebrating the lasting consequences of the Incarnation of Jesus. The mystery of the incarnation calls people to strive for divinity and recognition of God's abiding presence in all.

From a motivational standpoint, the call to emulate the perfection of Jesus Christ is a tall order! But striving for excellence is a hallmark of one who is motivated. The incarnational mystery of the Catholic faith assures that Catholic schools set high expectations for students and foster their drive towards success. The National Catholic Education Commission of Australia (2015) stated that Catholic schools should "acknowledge, promote and celebrate the particular God-given gifts of each student," recognizing that each student is capable of excellence. The document revealed that Catholic schools aim to provide students with an "educational foundation for life to the full, meaning the full development of the person – intellectually, spiritually, physically, morally and emotionally" (2015). Jesus Christ is the epitome of the fully developed person, and thus the goal to which all Catholics should strive.

Much research has shown the power of high expectations for student learning and achievement, both from teachers and from students themselves (i.e., Brophy & Good, 1970; Eccles & Wigfield, 1985; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Motivation theories support the power of students striving for excellence, especially when they feel that they are capable of achieving success. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs includes the need for self-actualization as the highest level in the model (Maslow, 1987). Self-actualization represents a need to satisfy one's full potential. Self-determination theory, as noted above, includes competence as one of the three basic needs to foster motivation. Students need to feel capable and that they are working toward

an appropriately challenging outcome in order to sustain positive motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Likewise, self-efficacy, from social cognitive theory, is a motivating belief in one's capability to perform a given task, developed in part from previous successes or mastery experiences (Bandura, 1993; Schunk, 1991). Another prominent motivation theory, expectancy-value theory, posits that students are motivated to the extent that they perceive value in a task and they have a high expectancy that they will achieve success (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In this way, students' beliefs about their competence and expectations of achieving success compel them to strive for excellence in their work.

Achievement goal theory, discussed earlier, focuses on the reasons people pursue certain tasks. People can be motivated either by mastery goals (to learn and improve), by performance goals (to demonstrate competence or avoid demonstrating incompetence), or by some combination of the two (Ames, 1992; Harackiewicz et al., 2002). A mastery-goal orientation epitomises the notion of striving for divinity. When teachers in Catholic schools teach students that working hard to improve themselves and learn as much as they can to reach their God-given potential, they are promoting mastery goals and behaving in a very mission-driven way, for Catholic educators would see such persistence as Christ-like perseverance.

However, Catholic schools can also be seen in many cases as promoting performance goals when the drive for excellence is manifested as an emphasis on performance over learning and pressure for students to outperform one another and students from other schools. Particularly when schools are faced with enrolment concerns, it is easy to see how the need to compete in a local education market can lead schools to emphasise selling points like high test scores and college admission rates. Focusing on these performance indicators rather than actual student learning and growth does not foster the same adaptive pattern of motivation as mastery goal

supportive environments. The challenge for Catholic schools, then, is to keep the mystery of the Incarnation at the forefront by stressing the importance of striving for modelling one's life on Jesus over the external rewards and societal pressures to simply demonstrate performance.

The Eucharist

The final and greatest central mystery of the Catholic faith is the Eucharist; the 'source and summit' of Catholic life (Vatican Council, 1963). In fact, the Eucharist is not so much of a fourth mystery as it is a gathering of all of the other mysteries into one. The mystery of the Eucharist is that the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ and people are invited to partake of Him, commemorating the actions of Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper. According to Nuzzi's theology of Catholic school leadership (2012), the Eucharist encompasses all of the other mysteries:

> What happens at the Eucharist is that a community of disciples of Jesus Christ who share a common faith (a relationship rooted in the Trinity), come together and recount the story of Jesus' death and resurrection (the Paschal Mystery) and in so doing, make Jesus present anew in the community (Incarnation) through the sacrament of His body and blood. (pp. 7-8)

Being the most important mystery of the Catholic faith, the Eucharist is celebrated daily in the Church and Catholics are called to participate at least weekly, on Sundays (Catholic Church 2180). Catholic schools may vary in how often they celebrate Mass as a whole school community or for select groups (classes, grade levels, etc.), but the Eucharist is certainly built into the regular school schedule. At a minimum, most Catholic schools celebrate the Eucharist regularly. The Eucharist, being at the centre of a Catholic school, provides purpose and meaning

to all that happens in the building. The National Catholic Education Commission (2015) states that Catholic schools are charged with, "Challenging students to find, through God, meaning and value in their lives." The Eucharist serves as a reminder that God is in all things within the school and that as God, reigns as the purpose, the source and summit, of all that people do.

The concept of purpose (alternatively conceptualised as meaning or value) is fundamental for student motivation. Expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) conceptualises value as subjective task values, whereby some tasks are enjoyable or interesting in and of themselves (Intrinsic Value), some are valuable because they are useful or relevant for the future (Importance Value), and other tasks are viewed as important for one's identity or self-concept (Attainment Value). The latter is perhaps most clearly aligned with the mystery of the Eucharist in Catholic schools. While students may not find every academic exercise or assignment to be intrinsically valuable or important and relevant to their futures, the Eucharistic belief that God is in all things and that people do everything for God makes every activity in the school valuable for the Attainment Value of giving their best to God.

Self-determination theory also reiterates the concept of the purpose or meaning of people's work as key to motivation. Of the three basic human needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, autonomy is the most crucial for motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). Autonomy is the feeling that one's behaviour is internally controlled and that there is some degree of choice in one's actions rather than being externally regulated. The concept of autonomy is associated with meaning and purpose, as one who is autonomous has freedom to pursue their own interests and goals. Self-determination research has shown that when students are given a meaningful rationale for why an activity or goal is important, they are more likely to feel autonomous and in control of their actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2009). In this way,

framing all that is done in Catholic schools in the mystery of the Eucharist enables students to internalise that rationale and be more motivated to do their best in all school related endeavours.

Conclusion

Applying Nuzzi's framework of a theology of Catholic education leadership (2012) to key concepts from various academic motivation theories shows how Catholic schools are uniquely inclined to foster adaptive motivational environments. The Paschal Mystery relates to experiencing the ups and downs of life and schooling as participating in Jesus' death and resurrection, thereby learning from failures and persisting through challenges. The Trinity guides Catholic schools to promote a deep sense of community and belongingness for all students, for people live in community just as God is a community of Father, Son, and Spirit. The Incarnation suggests that just as Jesus became man, all humanity can be perfected as divinity. Thus, Catholic schools compel students to strive for excellence and perfection in all endeavours to bring glory to God. Finally, the Eucharist represents all other mysteries of the faith rolled into one, providing a sense of purpose and a deep meaning to the ritualization and remembrance of the mysteries in action through the school.

While it is true that many schools, whether public, charter, or private, may have school climates and classroom instructional practices that are well aligned with best practices in motivation research, the foundation of Catholic schools in the mysteries of the Church provides an inherent design for an adaptive learning environment. Catholic schools should continue to emphasise these mysteries of the faith in ways that exemplify positive motivational climates for students.

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