The Mindful Educator

Hope Amidst an Uncertain World

In Hebrews we read, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul. A hope both sure and steadfast.” Jesus is our anchor, our hope in an uncertain world. United with Jesus, together with our school communities, we begin a new school year with a positive and hopeful outlook in the midst of so much uncertainty. We can prepare ourselves in a variety of ways so that our message and teachings are proclaimed with authenticity and courage. The familiar adage is so true, we cannot give what we do not possess. Therefore, it is important that we anchor ourselves in Jesus through prayer, participating in the sacraments, reading Scripture, making time for rest, relaxation, and fun with family and friends, to list just a few.

Once spiritually, physically, and emotionally enriched we are then ready to tackle all the directives proposed by the CDC, the state, local school districts, and the Offices of Catholic Education in order to ensure a safe, healthy, and engaging learning environment for all. Change is never easy and it is not uncommon to experience anxiety about the many questions whirling about in our minds, such as: Will the children keep their masks on once they leave their cohort? Where are the students academically after all this online learning? How do I encourage the children to abide by these health directives consistently for the benefit of all? and How do we address the students’ worries and concerns? Thank God, there are a plethora of resources to give us hope as educators and strategies for creating a worthwhile learning experience, whether the instruction is in-person or virtual. There are also materials available that assist educators in explaining and working with students in dealing with the new normal and strategies for dealing with the effects of the pandemic in an age-appropriate manner.

Administrators, colleagues, parents, and students were awed with how educators continued instructing their students and preparing them to advance for the next grade level from day one of the quarantine. Creating these lessons was a lot of work, but the dedication and countless hours of preparing stimulating virtual classes was absolutely amazing and inspiring. Many have said and we know it to be true that teaching in-person is more advantageous for all, but the reality is that in order to meet the needs of all students, especially those with compromised health conditions, we must offer instruction in a variety of ways including virtual learning until a vaccine is discovered. Teachers have reflected on the online experience and recognized what was effective and what strategies may need to be tweaked for future virtual lessons.

Teachers instinctively were able to put into practice strategies suggested by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) by reassuring students that these are difficult times and adults are working hard to find a cure and keep all of us protected. This compassionate attitude discussed in virtual classes provided the children the opportunity to express their worries and concerns. Teachers and classmates listened and offered their own perspectives; thus, these types of age-appropriate conversations were a source of support. Additionally, some teachers implemented time after instruction for students to visit with their classmates, thus enhancing their social-emotional needs. The NASP emphasized that the daily interaction with teachers and classmates offered students consistency and some predictability in these unprecedented times.

After six months of being apart from the standard school setting, in addition to addressing COVID-19 concerns, teachers, students, school communities, and the entire country are currently dealing with civil unrest. This is a major concern that cannot be overlooked or ignored. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Mt 5: 9) is one of the eight beatitudes proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Jesus also taught us the greatest law: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22: 39). We discover in the story of the Good Samaritan, that our neighbor is all of humanity. Catholic means universal; therefore, we must strive to implement the "be-attitude" of peacemaking, putting Jesus’ law of love into action. We make Jesus’ words come alive through our "be-attitudes" of respect and reverence for the dignity of human life that is the right of every person since we are all made in the image and likeness of God.
According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. It is a teaching founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came 'to bring glad tidings to the poor ... liberty to captives ... recovery of sight to the blind' (Lk 4: 18-19), and who identified himself with the 'least of these,' the hungry and the stranger" (cf. Mt 25:45) (USCCB, 1998, pg. 2). As Catholic schools, we adhere to the teachings of Jesus and the magisterium of the Church, therefore, the school community must provide opportunities for students to foster a genuine concern and respect for our neighbor in the school, the home, the community, and the world through participation in a variety of service projects.

One enjoyable activity to emphasize the importance of respecting diversity is by providing each child with a piece of fruit, for example, an orange. Ask each child to carefully examine and to note the details of their orange. After about five minutes the oranges are collected and mixed together. The students are then asked to select their orange. Surprisingly, students have no problem locating their orange. This exercise would lead into a discussion about how, like oranges, each of us is a unique and special gift of God's creation. In the discussion, teachers would relay to students their own acceptance of differences in others. As students witness the open-mindedness and welcoming attitude of their teacher and other adults, the good example they observe may cause them to become more accepting and sensitive members in today's diversified world.

Another exercise in accepting and respecting cultural diversity would be to inquire of school families their cultural origins. Students can then work together to explore the language, food, art, entertainment, geographic, and historic aspects of various cultures represented in the school. The study of these cultures may include the following: way of life; map skills/geography; music/hobbies/art/games; and famous people from that culture. While studying a specific culture, students can make flags and design a travel brochure, cook various ethnic foods, design clothes, play games from that culture, sing or perform songs, make puppets, assemble a collage or album of pictures, learn to count to ten in a foreign language; learn to say, "Hello, how are you?"; establish an Internet pen-pal connection with someone from the country studied. It is hoped that by learning about cultures through various engaging activities, students will appreciate, respect, and value cultural differences. United with Jesus the Divine Peacemaker, we hope that acceptance and respect for the giftedness of others will happen through activities such as these and more. Together we can be a catalyst for peace and hope for a more respectful world!

Resources for discussing racism with students:
https://www.unicef.org/parenting/talking-to-your-kids-about-racism
https://tinyurl.com/ycmz3tpj
https://www.racepride.pitt.edu/


Materials for discussing COVID-19 with children and strategies for online learning:
https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/learn/resources-for-k-12-educators/
https://www.weareteachers.com/free-online-learning-resources/#elementary
https://www.teachforamerica.org/stories/7-tips-for-being-a-great-virtual Teacher