Forming the Formators:
A Review of the Literature on Adult Formation for Whole Child Education

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Abstract

Inspired by the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College's research on adult formation for whole-child education and an October 2025 convening of worldwide Catholic educators on the topic, this literature review seeks to address the dearth of topic-specific research related to the "formation of formators." Gathering insights from prevailing scholarship in the fields of formative education, whole teacher education, and adult learning, eight emergent research themes are explored, including analysis of the interior and exterior dimensions of the development of formators. As well, the relevance of research and its particular application within the Catholic education arena is considered in the literature review. In line with the recent development of research associated with formative education, various questions and considerations for future exploration are identified. In particular, further investigation and synthesis of the development formation-related resources within the context of Catholic education represents an area of ongoing research development.

Keywords: formative education, adult formation, professional development, whole child education, holistic

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Introduction

In the letter "Disegnare Nuove Mappe Di Speranza" ("Drawing New Maps of Hope"), Pope Leo XIV issued a renewed call to Catholic educators and Catholic educational institutions to "inaugurate a new season that speaks to the hearts of the younger generations, reuniting knowledge and meaning, competence and responsibility, faith and life" (Leo XIV, 2025). As is the case for other modern Church writings that acknowledge and enumerate the relevance of Catholic education in the fabric of contemporary concerns about society and the Church, the letter, issued on the 60th anniversary of *Gravissimum Educationis*, affirms the need for a vision of Catholic education that encompasses the dimensions of the human person as *imago Dei*. The Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College's Whole Child in United States Catholic Schools Framework represents a notable example of conceptually capturing this holistic approach to education, particularly in light of the need to equip young people with the ability to navigate an increasingly complex world within educational institutions that operate "rooted in the conviction that human beings have a transcendent destiny" (Wyttenbach, McMahon, & Pileggi-Proud, 2023).

Wyttenbach, McMahon, and Pileggi-Proud (2023) acknowledge that the implementation of Whole Child practices in Catholic schools involves wrestling with the "formation dilemma." Such work involves navigating the formation of Catholic school leaders, the mindsets of educators, the connections between belief and action within educational contexts, and the extent to which educators' actions help to enact change and reform within a framework of distinctly Catholic holistic education. Inherent in the recognition of this dilemma is the assertion that the overarching aims of Whole Child education in Catholic schools that distinguish it from secular efforts toward holistic education – shaping the future of the planet by focusing on integral human development, embodying care for the whole person, and engaging in sacred accompaniment, as Warner, Wyttenbach, and McMahon (2023) argue – impose certain demands and idiosyncrasies on the formative process of educators within these spaces.

The dispositions, practices, and policies that create the possibility of Whole Child education are reliant on the extent to which educators entrusted and committed to this work have undergone the necessary formation and development. In this article, we examine the literature on "forming the formators," drawing upon an analysis of the available conceptual and empirical research that links conceptions of education as a formative enterprise to considerations of the formation of educators. We argue that the emergent dimensions of this review surface the feasibility of a framework for adult formation for whole child education in Catholic schools, synthesizing the body of knowledge around adult formation across educational contexts with the richness and depth of the spiritual and theological traditions underpinning Catholic education.

Approach

Noting the dearth of resources *specifically* devoted to "adult formation for whole child education," or forming those who themselves do the work of formation, we endeavor through the literature review to identify and analyze relevant ideas and insights from sources related to adult education and whole person education. While scholarship solely devoted to the "formation of formators" is limited, there is ample research tangentially related to the topic. For this research project, more than 70 resources were selected for their insight into various intersecting dimensions of understanding how formators – broadly defined as educators or other individuals actively participating in and facilitating the formative education of students – are themselves formed.
Identified resources are categorized by the substantive theme(s) of each work; the most common coding of materials includes materials associated with "formative education," "whole teacher education," and "adult learning." Given the Catholic dimension of the project and its animating role in the work of the Roche Center, Christian and Catholic-specific resources are included the literature review, and due to the impetus of Catholic education to form the "body, mind, and spirit" of students, Catholic education materials feature prominently in the review. The majority of the formation-related scholarship has been published since 2000, with more than half of resources written in the last fifteen years, reflecting what appears to be increasing interest in work on formative education.

Prevailing Dimensions

Analysis of the assembled resources surfaces a few notable themes. Much of the literature associated with formative education favors the whole-person development of *learners*, and less the development of the formators themselves. Still, there are meaningful ideas to be gleaned from such sources and applied to adult formation, as an understanding of the vision of formative education – the holistic, multidimensional development of a learner – provides compelling insight into what is expected or desired of those doing the work of formation. Made clear through the research as well is that formative education represents both a whole-person and *whole-life* endeavor. As such, the imperative to learn, grow, and develop – to undergo the process of formation – transcends a defined, formal education process, presenting instead as a lifelong continuum with alternating spikes or valleys of formative activity. The lines between"learner" and "educator" (or "formator") thus become blurred; even as a teacher or instructor, one continues to learn, to be shaped, and to be formed in ongoing fashion.
Below, we share insight into eight areas that have been identified and which offer some meaningful insight into the work of "forming the formators": the need for clear and precise formation-related language; a conception of

the different dimensions comprising formative education; Catholic dimensions of formative education; the emphasis on the self and identity in formative work; the importance of social, relational, and community dimensions of formation; the necessity of feedback and reflection in advancing formation; the call for ongoing and sustained engagement with formative development; and the nuances related to various spiritual dimensions of formative work. Each offers a glimpse of prevailing ideas and outstanding questions that reside in the literature. Taken together, they provide perspective on both the poignant challenges and powerful potential of enacting formative education, both in the classroom and in the shaping of whole-person educators. In the subsequent sections, we articulate notable aspects of the eight identified areas, connecting salient ideas to the topic of educator formation within a holistic, Catholic education.

The Language of Formation: A Call for Precision and Clarity

A principal challenge faces those engaged in the work of formation: naming with precision the effort itself. Germane to this research project, two sets of questions deserve particular clarity: "What does formative education entail?" and "What does the formation of formators involve?" Seeking answers through various adult education, teacher education, and formative education resources renders an expansive and partially divergent set of responses; a cohesive or consistent definition remains elusive. In exploring the motivation to teach others, David Hansen names the oft-cited signifiers associated with education: the draw for a classroom educator is a "vocation" and a "calling" (Hansen, 1996). In related fashion, Alan Tom eschews the reduction of teaching to a profession, or "applied science," and instead characterizes teaching as a "moral craft"; as such, the formation of educators ought to involve dynamic interaction between theory and practice and should occur through a practiced, apprenticeship approach (Tom, 1980, pp. 318, 321; Tom, 1984, pp. 13-14). Anchoring the teaching profession's roots in the virtue ethics arena, Chris Higgins conceives of educating as a practice requiring regular reflection and ongoing self-cultivation (Higgins, 2011).

Philip Jackson's delineation between mimetic and transformative teaching offers additional conceptions of the teaching practice and invites reflection on the orientation of teacher formation (Jackson, 1986). In line with Jackson's characterization of transformative pedagogues and pedagogies, Patricia Cranton, Jack Mezirow, and Douglas Yacek point to the possibility of profound, whole-person change by emphasizing *trans*formative education (Cranton, 2106; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1991; Yacek, 2021). Writing about its place in the fields of adult education, higher education, and professional education, Cranton details transformative learning as "a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated" and notes that such work must also "incorporate imagination, intuition, soul, and affect" into understanding of the concept (Cranton, 2016, p. 16). Stephen Preskill stresses a separate dimension of teaching practice by spotlighting the role of storytelling in the

work of an educator (Preskill, 1998). Darryl de Marzio advocates that educators ought to feel a sense of depth in their work, writing that "teachers need for the practice itself to offer opportunities for personal meaning and fulfillment" (De Marzio, 2020, p. 2). De Marzio also offers a seemingly striking addition to formative language by characterizing teaching as the practice of asceticism, arguing that "asceticism as a mode of self-renunciation is not something that is antithetical to the flourishing of the teacher, but, on the contrary, is a stance that contributes to it" (De Marzio, 2007, p. 349).

John Dirkx centers the nourishment of the soul, or "soulwork," in the formation of formators (Dirkx, 2002, p. 83). The notion of soul resonates when considering the formation of adults for whole child development in the Catholic education space, as it extends beyond a narrow conception of training or knowledge transfer and calls for the whole adult to be considered, cared for, and cultivated in order to form whole learners (Whole Child Education). Similarly, James Michael Lee, writing of religious educators, includes cognitive, affective, verbal, nonverbal, unconscious, and lifestyle elements as parts of the work of formation (Lee, 1985). The language of formation, whether of learners or educators, demands close consideration.

Multidimensionality: Holistic, Whole Person, and Formative Approaches

In probing what specifically comprises the education of a whole person, whether learner or educator, "holistic," "whole person," and "formative" represent the most common descriptors of such work. Appearing as interchangeable constructs, each conveys an effort aimed at bringing the many facets of a human being into conversation with one another. Akin to the challenge of accounting for various definitional elements of formation, the literature presents an array of human life dimensions that could or should feature within all-encompassing education.

While traditional conceptions of learning tend to fall within the confines of "technical-rational view of knowledge" (Lee, 1985, p. 79), holistic education necessitates consideration of "reason and emotion, mind and body, matter and spirit" (Schreiner, 2009, p. 2); of body, mind, and spirit; or "soul, body, and mind" (Congregation for Catholic Education). A full review of the literature constructs an even more expansive inventory of formative dimensions as authors make the case for combinations of *cognitive*, *intellectual*, *physical*, *spiritual*, *emotional*, *moral*, *relational*, *social*, *aesthetic*, *pastoral*, *behavioral*, *volitional*, *imaginal*, and *cultural* elements to be included within the construct of holistic education. Various authors convey the logic that because learners are complex, multidimensional human beings, those who form them should themselves undergo comprehensive, holistic formation. To know and help form the whole humanity of a learner requires an educator to be formed in similarly whole fashion.

Following this line of reasoning, Rosemary Martin calls for holistic formator education that considers the social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual development of learners in order to shape the whole educator

(Martin, 2015). Elena Aguilar cites competencies such as emotional intelligence, community building, storytelling, mindfulness, compassion, and a willingness to learn as critical dimensions of an educator's formation (Aguilar, 2018). Bruce Novak notes a distinguishing feature of holistic education "is the effort to ground the education of human beings in what is most truly basic to our humanity," which requires honoring the neurological or "hardwiring" element of humans for holism, recognizing the importance of incarnational dimensions to learning, and attending to humans' propensity for learning through aesthetic means (Novak, 2019, p. 2). Attempting to build an integrative notion of formation, Tobin Hart offers a conception of formative education that includes contemplation, empathy, imagination, attention to beauty, and understanding of the body – and its "feeling, sensation, movement, physiological processes" – as essential to whole-person development.

Catholic Dimensions of Whole Person Education

Citing the various ways in which children learn throughout their lives, Elizabeth Spier, Frederik Leenknecht, and David Osher (2019, p. 287) attempt to craft a comprehensive approach to the development of holistic educators.[1] Among the considerations enumerated by the authors are the development of educators' affective, social, emotional, cognitive capacities in addition to orienting their environmental or contextual situatedness, recognizing that teachers' formation represents a continual process (Spier, Leenknecht, & Osher, 2019, p. 291). The body of writings focused specifically on the formation of educators and catechists within the Catholic Church and its institutions are deeply imbued with a sense of vocation. *Lay Catholics in Schools* (1982) and *Educating Together in Catholic Schools* (2007) emphasize "what is at stake" in terms of the formation in no uncertain terms, asserting that poor formation and preparation of teachers "undermines the effectiveness of the overall formation of the student" and " the life witness they must present." The former, in particular, asserts that the vocational nature of education in Catholic schools highlights the stark differences in spiritual formation toward this vocational nature between the consecrated and the laity, thus substantiating the need for "religious formation [that] must be oriented toward both personal sanctification and apostolic mission, for these are two inseparable elements in a Christian vocation" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982).

More recent reflections on the formation of Catholic educators around the world draw an outsized focus toward the religious and spiritual preparation; in Robinson & Cranley (2025), formation was conceptualized as "education of the heart" by teachers and leaders participating in their study. Similarly, Fussell's (2021) framework of faith formation for lay educators illustrates the processes of vocational framework that connect personal and professional faith experiences, encounter with colleagues and personal reflection, the construction

[1] In particular, Spier et al. name children's "genetic make-up; neurobiology; social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and ethical characteristics and competencies; temperament and personality; attitudes, values and mindsets; cultural and linguistic background; [and] accumulated experience and knowledge" as contributors to their learning.

of intrinsic motivation, and responses to spiritual, professional, or personal transition and crisis. In these and other reflections on Catholic teacher formation, such as Robinson and Fic (2023) and Franchi and Rymarz (2022), there is an argument for more explicit, direct, and intentional spiritual and religious formation as core to vocational formation. Such an approach is posed as a response to perceptions of growing secularism within societies and communities as well as perceptions of ineffective or inadequate spiritual and religious training among lay Catholic educators who have for decades made up the majority of the workforce of Catholic education. This prioritization of spiritual and religious formation might be traced back to the parallel considerations of Catholic catechists; in the 1997 General Directory for Catechesis, the primary purpose of catechist formation is to "mature as a person, a believer and as an apostle…so as to be able to fulfill his responsibilities well".

Understanding the Self, Proceeding from One's Identity

Across the literature, a consistently named prerequisite of whole-person education is the willingness of formators to deeply explore and understand themselves. Proceeding from a foundational sense of identity, a formator ought to be equipped to engage communities of learners. Sandra Vianne McLean argues as much in addressing the "attention (that) is converging on the experience of *becoming* a teacher, that complex and often conflicted intrapersonal and social process" (McLean, 1999, p. 55). The notion of *becoming* encapsulates a whole-person approach to holistic adult development; more than executing a set of uninvolved job routines, educators are called to bring their full selves to the work at hand. McLean writes that those responsible for forming teachers have increasingly paid attention to the ways future educators "think about themselves as they master professional practice and undergo the substantial personal transformations associated with this period of their lives (McLean, 1999, p. 55). Zygmunt Bauman underscores the process of construing an identity over the course of a person's life. It is only through establishing and self-constituting[2] an individual's identity that formation, or transformation – or alteration of an identity's solidity – can occur (Bauman, 1992, pp. 150, 193-194).

Doret de Ruyter and Jim Conroy (2002, p. 516) convey identity's significance through its link to a person's underlying and intrinsic drive: "the ideals which form part of a person's ideal identity offer the individual a sense of purpose and meaning and give her a direction. The ideal identity of people comprises deep aspirations or desires that provide them with a framework for their formation of their identity and their actions." Anthony Giddens' assessment of self-identity amidst modernity's dynamism points to its potentially edifying role. A sense of stable self-identity "has a feeling of biographical continuity" and safeguards against threats to the

[2] Bauman describes self-constitution of identity as a process involving "disassembling alongside the assembling, adoption of new elements as much as shedding of others, learning together with forgetting" (Bauman, 1992, p. 194).

integrity of the self – an integrity seen as valuable (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). Further, Giddens (1991, p. 54) points to a person's identity being found not in one's behavior nor in the reactions of others to an individual's life but "in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*." Similarly, Charles Taylor writes of the biographical nature of self-identity; a veritable human story – one's identity – is marked by its authenticity and ongoing evolution. Such evolution includes the relational components of one's life, which help shape identity. As well, an individual's past, present state, and aspirational future matter in forming identity: "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going" (Taylor, 1989, p. 47).

Gary Borich offers an expansive notion of the self, or selves, that merit consideration by a developing formator:

> The concept of "self" as acquired by teachers through relationships with significant/salient others in their professional environment include the concepts of self-as-process, self-as-doer, and self-as-object. Self-as-process refers to the psychological processes of thinking, remembering, and perceiving, while self-as-doer describes the physical acts or performances that are observed, reflected and evaluated by the "self" and others. The self-as-object is defined as the attitudes, feelings, and thoughts about one's self. The self-as-doer participates in the significant / salient other relationship; the self-as-process experiences the relationship; and the self-as-object feels the impact of this relationship (Borich, 1995, p. 95).

As well, Borich writes of other conceptions of self that play a foundational role in an educator's work – their *bodily self*, or awareness of themself as a physical entity; a sense of *self-identity*, or sense of self in relation to significant or salient others; *self-extension*, or outward behavior (performing self); *self-esteem*, or self-worth; and *self-image*, or past, present, and future perceptions of self (Borich, 1999, p. 97-100). The exploration of one's role as whole-person educator necessarily involves an extensive exploration of one's interior and, as Borich notes, exterior, conceptions of self. Related to the notion of exterior self, Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J. writes of the modern-day exploration of identity as a process that involves relationality. Building on the work of Giddens, who notes that intimacy and trust depend on community, Gallagher offers the idea that exploring and expressing one's identity involves social activity, for the "'opening out of the individual to the other' becomes a key way of searching for identity today" (Gallagher, 1996, p. 58).

McLean writes of reclaiming elements either forgotten or wantonly ignored in forming educators, including making underlying gender-related, racial, and political power dynamics explicit. Maxine Greene notes that formators-to-be are called to make deeply personal choices about the educators they wish to become (Greene 1981). The foundational understanding of oneself, and one's becoming, appears in the work of Parker Palmer, who posits that "good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (Palmer, 2007, p. 10). That

"true self", which animates the voice of the "teacher within," also allows for a sense of connectedness with others (Palmer, 2007, p. 11, 30). Palmer argues that "as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes" (Palmer, 2007, p. 25). Further, a profound sense of self facilitates the creation of a "community of truth" in which formators and those being formed work in concert with one another and together create meaningful learning experiences (Palmer, 2007, p. 92).

Emphasis on Relational, Social, and Community Dimensions

Extending from the importance of an individual formator's identity, including Gallagher's and Palmer's allusions to connectedness with others, the relational dimensions of formative work appear regularly throughout the literature. The selected works portray a visual of a formator's concentric circles of engagement, including interactions with institutional colleagues, learners' families, local community members, and society more broadly. Serving as a whole-person educator, argue various authors, necessarily involves communal commitments, beginning with the learners most immediately in the formators' care. Connections with others not only constitute the everyday work of a formator working with a community of learners (or a "community of truth," as Palmer denotes); sociality plays a critical role in shaping adults to do formative work. Put simply, as the Roche Center conveys, *relationships matter* (Wyttenbach et al, 2025).

Central to holistic education is the cultivation of trust between educators and students, a competency that educators must develop through their own formation. John Miller notes that building trusting relationships represents one of holistic education's "keystones", along with love, joy, and mystery – all of which reinforce the relational dimensions of formation (Miller, 2022). Miller extends the notion of connection and community beyond human space, arguing that an educator's relational orientation must also include links to the natural world, given its reinforcement of educators' sense of interdependence (Miller, 2022, p. 477, 480).

Writing about the formative roles and duties of Catholic educators, Thomas Groome highlights the foundational role of relationships in contributing to educators' flourishing. For Groome, such human links extend from the inherent relationality of people to one another: "For though each person is a 'whole' instead of a 'part', we are ever related to others and responsible for them as well as for ourselves" (Groome, 1998, p. 80). For the whole-person educator, assuming the role of formator requires embodying the values and ideals being conveyed to learners. That is, they are invited to serve as both a witness and an engaged, vulnerable, listening conversation partner to students (Groome, 1998, p. 198, 206-208). Further, Groome argues that the work of formation surpasses the classroom setting, as formators are called to shape learners' global consciousness and a commitment to justice**,** both relational realities. Educators' formation, therefore, ought to include an orientation toward relational, social, and global truths (Groome, 1998).

The social dimension of adult formation additionally appears in work by Colleen Campbell and Thomas Carani, who emphasize the place of accompaniment, "a relationship between two or more people who share mutuality and reciprocity in the spiritual life," in adult formation (Carani and Campbell, 2019, p. 11). Citing the various objectives of an accompaniment relationship – a deeper relationship with Christ, the integration of the various dimensions of a person's life, the maturity of one's faith – Campbell and Carani note that formation through accompaniment occurs gradually, "respectful of human nature, patient and understanding, and builds on graces given by the Spirit", and, in line with formation's emphasis on self, allows for deep identity formation ("a person learns deep truths about themselves, their vocation, and God") (Campbell and Carani, 2019, p. 19-23).

Rebecca Nye and David Hay emphasize the place of relational consciousness in the spiritual development of children. As children explore their connection to spiritual matters, the appearance of the "compound property" of relational consciousness is marked by an unusual level of perceptiveness of their social environment and an expression of relationship to other entities, whether objects, other people, themselves, or God (Nye, 2006, p. 109). The spiritual development of children, as for adults, includes a relational dimension.

The Aspen Institute's work on "supporting the whole teacher" stresses both the social and emotional dimensions of adult formation. The Institute notes that teachers "can create classroom and school cultures that provide opportunities for students to learn and practice the social and emotional competencies that are closely linked to academic achievement as well as success in the workplace and in life" (Aspen Institute, 2025, p. 1). To do so, though, educators themselves "need both preservice and ongoing professional learning opportunities to focus on integrating these competencies into their instruction and their interactions with students" (Aspen Institute, 2025, p. 1). An emphasis on social and emotional dimensions in educator formation can generate multiple forms of impact; both student learning[3] and educator wellbeing are enhanced through such work (Aspen Institute, 2025, p. 1-2). In related fashion, the Learning Policy Institute cites social-emotional capacity as a key disposition of educator development, noting that "Human relationships catalyze healthy development and learning" and underscoring the multidimensional nature of learning, which is "social, emotional, and cognitive" (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2022).

Additionally, Mezirow emphasizes the social dimension of educator formation, which appears in multiple forms. Mezirow spotlights the development of formators through communal learning and reflection, stresses the interactional nature of educators' work with learners, and, in similarly relational fashion, notes that educators foster a sense of social responsibility in students (Mezirow, 2000, p. 117-121). Etienne Wenger also stresses the significance of sociality by highlighting the place of communities of practice – "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" – and

[3] In particular, research demonstrates that a focus on social and emotional elements of educators' professional development can strengthen teacher-student relationships and facilitate deep learning experiences for students (Aspen Institute, 2025, pp. 1-2).

learning communities – those "whose practice it is to keep alive the tension between competence and practice" through shared learning – in the educational process (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger, 1999, p. 148). Such bodies play a role in both formators' and students' development and reinforce sociality, a quality displayed through members' interactions and the process of shared learning.

Intentional Feedback and Reflection Matter

The literature makes clear that both processing feedback and regularly engaging in reflection represent notable dimensions of adult formation. In line with the relational aspect of educator formation, formators experience meaningful development through their collective engagement and evaluation of feedback data. Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey call attention to empirical data loops that provide opportunities for impactful and actionable insight (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). Processed both individually and communally, feedback loops offer the occasion to learn from experience; such practice appears linked to the ongoing development of a formator – a requirement "to take individual and collective learning at work to the next level" (Kegan and Lahey, 2009, p. 5). The authors note the significance of groups working together to make sense of qualitative and quantitative data, a process that often involves diagnosing individuals' hesitancy to change (Kegan and Lahey, 2009, p. 124). Seeking to learn from past experience facilitates connection and, ideally, serves as a recursive process and relationship-strengthening and community-enhancing mechanism.

Writing about learning organizations, Aguilar stresses through *The Art of Coaching Teams* the importance of regular learning and engagement with feedback. In outlining the indicators of a learning organization, Aguilar invites colleagues to reflect on the degree to which a learning environment, learning processes and practices, and leadership activity contribute to thriving organizations (Aguilar, 2016). Aguilar writes in *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators* that ongoing learning – the habit or disposition of curiosity – allows educators to thrive in their vocational pursuits (Aguilar, 2018, p. 30-32). Similarly, research centering on the role of feedback and reflection within professional development efforts demonstrates the positive effects of job-embedded coaching, mentoring, and feedback on the mastery of teacher skills and competencies (Dunst et al, 2015). Eleanor Drago-Severson and Jessica Blum-DeStefano (2018) note that the strategies central to incorporating feedback as a means of supporting teacher capacity, which include modeling vulnerability, sharing developmental ideas, and building an infrastructure for feedback, are elements of what they call "a developmental culture of feedback".

The literature illustrates that the particular characteristics or operating conditions of an educator's organization help shape the educator's formation as much as an individual's beliefs or conceptualizations of formation. Carrie Leana writes of the role of social capital – the relationships between and among teachers – as a key factor in advancing not only the quality of instruction but also the formation of teachers themselves. As a complement

to human capital (or "teacher experience, subject knowledge, and pedagogical skills"), emphasizing an educator's social capital offers the prospect of creating an ongoing, reflective teacher improvement dynamic:

> What happens when you combine human and social capital? What if teachers are good at their jobs and also talk to one another frankly and on a regular basis about what they do in math class? If human capital is strong, individual teachers should have the knowledge and skills to do a good job in their own classrooms. But if social capital is also strong, teachers can continually learn from their conversations with one another and become even better at what they do (Leanna, 2011).

Mezirow emphasizes reflective discourse as an important dimension of transformative adult development (Mezirow, 2000, p. 10). As well, Linda Darling-Hammond et al. note the importance of regular reflection in ongoing teacher development, citing practices of "authentic practice, assessment, feedback, and reflection to accelerate learning" and "engaging in inquiry and analysis strategies that guide reflection and application" (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Schachner, & Wojcikiewicz, 2022). Further, the authors posit that systemic support for educator formation includes opportunities for feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Schachner, & Wojcikiewicz, 2022).

Emphasis on Sustained, Ongoing Engagement

Made evident as well throughout the literature is the need for sustained engagement with formative development. In the spirit of an educator *becoming*, there is recognition that formation represents an ongoing endeavor – and without a definite end, per se. Authors name continuous development, learning, and growth as necessary elements of formation; some point to such efforts as lifelong endeavors. Dirkx writes of an adult's ongoing quest for purpose, noting that "Bubbling just beneath this technical-rational surface is a continual search for meaning, a need to make sense of the changes and the empty spaces we perceive both within ourselves and our world" (Dirkx, 2002, p. 79). Rosemary Martin cites the dynamic nature of the transnational context as reason for continuous formation: "in a rapidly changing global environment, the evidence suggests that we need teachers who are enthusiastic, innovative and attentive to the social, emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual growth of their learners", thus requiring "a cycle of ongoing professional learning and development that looks first at the holistic needs of learning and then at the consequent learning needs of their teachers and finally models the learning-focused relationships necessary for effective learning to take place" (Martin, 2015, p. 257).

The Congregation for Catholic Education (2007) additionally names ongoing professional development and formation – professional, theological, and spiritual – of educators, both consecrated and lay, as critical elements

of the work of Catholic schools. In line with Martin's recognition of an ever-changing world, the congregation outlines a vision for continual formation:

> The continuous rapid transformation that affects man and today's society in all fields leads to the precocious aging of acquired knowledge that demands new attitudes and methods. The educator is required to constantly update the contents of the subjects he teaches and the pedagogical methods he uses. The educator's vocation demands a ready and constant ability for renewal and adaptation. It is not, therefore, sufficient to achieve solely an initial good level of preparation; rather what is required is to maintain it and elevate it in a journey of permanent formation. Because of the variety of aspects that it involves, permanent formation demands a constant personal and communal search for its forms of achievement, as well as a formation course that is also shared and developed through exchange and comparison between consecrated and lay educators of the Catholic school (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2007).

Thomas Groome reinforces the notion of the lifelong educator or formator by inviting Catholic formators to consider their roles as "for-life-for-all" educators (Groome, 1998, p. 427). Requiring a "lifelong conversion," Groome notes the deeply spiritual journey involved in becoming an educator committed to lifelong engagement. Electing to serve as an educator devoted to ongoing formation models for learners what their own lifelong learning journeys ought to entail. As such, Groome invites educators to participate in sustained formation.[4]

Attention to Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Formation

Among the various dimensions of formative education named throughout the literature, *spirituality* represents one of the most commonly cited elements of whole-person development. Analysis of research on formative, adult, and transformative education reveals multiple conceptions of what qualifies as spiritual. For example, Peter Schreiner advocates for holistic education anchored in spirituality, a term which "needs to be broad enough to include a religious contribution, as well as acknowledging a spiritual dimension to living that covers values, commitments and aesthetic concerns" (Schreiner, 2010). Schreiner continues by expanding the notion of spirituality as it is conceived within holistic education, writing that it "means generally an 'inner core' of every person that lies beyond the physical, social and other sources of personality named either in religious terms ('soul', 'the divine within') or in the language of depth psychology ('the higher self')" (Schreiner 2010). As

[4] In particular, Groome names the following dimensions as ones germane to sustained formator development: *engagement*; *attention*; *expression* and sharing their work with others; *reflection*; *connection to embedded wisdom*; *appropriation*, or helping learners embrace knowledge and wisdom; *decision*, or supporting learners in making their own commitments; and *caring for the teaching space* (Groome, 1998, pp. 430-439).

well, Schreiner points to the "the interconnectedness of the human being with the community s/he lives in and the wider context" inherent in spirituality, the link between spirituality and physical well-being, and recognition that "in the (holistic education) movement that there cannot be an education of the whole child without this transcendent dimension in education" (Schreiner, 2010).

Palmer notes that the spiritual dimension of an educator contributes to the formation of their "inner landscape of the teaching self" and serves as interplay with an educator's intellectual and emotional capacities (Palmer, 2007, p. 4-5). Groome identifies spirituality as fundamental to explaining an educator's vocational call to teach others (Groome, 1998). Christopher Beard names spirituality's many intersecting influences by tracing spiritual formation to "countless theological, sociological, psychological, and philosophical perspectives" and noting that spiritual development appears in both literature and scholarly research (Beard, 2017, 248). Writing of Catholic education, Gerald Grace enlarges conceptions of spirituality by advocating that spiritual capital – "the animating force and dynamic motive power of Catholic schooling internationally" which involves assets of faith and values emanating from a religious tradition – requires attention within the formative education realm (Grace, p. 119-120).

Lee seeks to encapsulate the boundaries of spirituality by borrowing from the work of Gordon Wakefield, who defines the concept as the "attitudes, beliefs, and practices which animate people's lives and help them reach out toward super-sensible realities" (Lee, 1985, p. 649; Wakefield, 1983, p. 549). Lee embeds spirituality in the space of formal religious practice – "All religions, Christian and non-Christian, have their spiritualities" – though more contemporary research points to emerging societal interest in spirituality without adherence to particular faith traditions. In considering the formation of formators, such a reality deserves consideration, a point emphasized by Michael MacKenzie. MacKenzie notes the place of spirituality within the adult education arena – "spirituality is one of a number of non-rational processes of 'ways of understanding' that have emerged in adult education, largely as a counter to a field that many argued was becoming too rationally centric or cognitively based" – and further notes that while traditionally linked to religious practice, the field of spirituality is now often viewed in its own, unique light (MacKenzie, 2022, p. 102-103).

Jane Regan writes of the need for adult spiritual development as a necessary element of faith formation and, more broadly, of the Catholic Church's ongoing development. To realize meaningful Church growth, or "to be genuinely Church in the twenty-first century," argues Regan (2002, p. 12), adult faith formation, and not merely the religious education of children and youth, must assume a central role. Adult spiritual development is needed both to "address the essential dimensions of the catechetical enterprise" and to foster "mature, committed adult communities of faith" (Regan, 2002, pp. 12-13). The spiritual development of adults not only *contributes* to the formation of a robust faith community but also *depends* upon community. In line with the relational and social dimensions of adult formation, Regan stresses the role of community in adult spiritual formation as hospitably

welcoming adults' range of meaning-making stages, supporting the separation of old meaning systems along with an embrace of new ones, and "recognizing the continuity of the person in the midst of the change" (Regan, 2002, pp. 60-61).

M. Shawn Copeland notes the inherent existential quality of spirituality, thus reinforcing its central role in adult formation. Copeland defines spirituality as "our capacity to relate to God, to other human beings, and to the natural world," emphasizing, like others, its relational quality (Copeland, 1998, p. 61). The connection to others and to the broader world serves as a foundation for human aspiration, argues Copeland; spirituality "is about the kinds of persons we are and the kinds of persons we hope to become" (Copeland, 1998, p. 61).

Dorothy Bass emphasizes the practice of spirituality as vital to the development of practical wisdom – what Aristotle described as *phronesis*, what Aquinas called *prudentia*, or what Bass has termed "the very kind of knowledge that people need to live well" (Bass, 2016, pp. 1-4). Such knowledge, though, tends to be undervalued in favor of cultivating individuals' intellectual capacity (Bass, 2016, pp. 1). Kathleen Cahalan (2016, p. 250) shares that forming such wisdom requires deliberate spiritual practice, which should always be oriented toward nurturing practical wisdom, or what Bass holds up as "Christian practical wisdom." Embodied spiritual practice is shared practice, and one that plays a role in educational, and formative, development. Calahan notes, for example, that "Theological teaching today, grounded in a wisdom epistemology, must arise from the spiritual practice of teachers and must seek to foster the spiritual development of students" (Calahan, 2016, p. 251).

While decreasing numbers of people claim membership in formal religious traditions, there remains an abiding global interest in spiritual matters (Evans, Lesage, & Corichi, 2025). The Pew Research Center notes that adults who identify as "religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular' – has climbed rapidly in the recent past across North America, Europe, parts of Latin America and some countries in the Asia-Pacific region," while the same global survey revealed that "sizable percentages of religiously unaffiliated adults – often called religious "nones" – do hold some religious or spiritual beliefs" (Evans et al., 2025). Today, the desire for spiritual engagement is made manifest in various secular spaces, including through new organizational efforts. In 2020, the Inner Development Goals (IDG) effort launched as a complement to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, aiming to "bring the power of inner development to global challenges faced by humanity," or to advance "inner growth for outer change" (Inner Development Goals). The IDG community includes those wishing to probe interior, spiritual topics related to societal change – individuals seeking a keener understanding of "being," "relating," and "inner compass" – and involves a growing number of adherents; today, more than 35,000 in 700 hubs across 90 countries identify as IDG members (Palmer, 2024; Inner Development Goals). Within the higher education space, coursework such as "The Spiritual Lives of Leaders" – a new offering through Harvard's Business School, Divinity School, and T.H. Chan School of

Public Health – engages students in exploring the roles of spirituality, meaning, and purpose in guiding decision making, leading others, and forming individuals' integrated and whole lives (Tong, 2022; Harvard Business School). Trans-university initiatives such as the LearningWell Coalition have emerged to advance a holistic approach to higher education. The coalition engages 35 member institutions, both secular and religious, in considering how to support the formation of university students to develop "a sense of identity, belonging, agency and purpose, laying the foundation for a lifetime of wellbeing, fulfilling relationships and meaningful work" (Learning Well Coalition). The emergence of spirituality-infused initiatives across various spaces expands the pathways to explore and advance holistic development. As well, the variety of spiritual offerings across sectors, geographies, and institutional types prompts reflection on whether diffuse forms of spiritual cultivation ultimately enhance the notion of spirituality or serve to deform the concept, including its role within formative education.

Areas for Further Exploration

In reflecting on the dimensions of adult formation presented in the literature, we first note the consequential need to better articulate the mechanisms, strategically or programmatically, that best respond to the demands of adult formation within the tapestry of formative education and cultivates the dispositions and skills that teachers need to support holistic, formative development of students. Practices related to andragogy, which encompasses the methods and principles used in adult education, and theological and spiritual formation provide necessary insight into operationalizing certain principles of educator formation suggested by the literature; however, the distinct aims of adult formation for Whole Child education in Catholic schools point to approaches that blend and integrate the technical and the spiritual such that they are deeply intertwined with one another. In particular, the role of prior knowledge and life experiences and the need to establish motivation for learning have the capacity to take on added depth and color given the novel orientation of Whole Child education as asserted and inferred by the variety of scholars referenced in this article (Knowles et al, 2020). The emergent work of Sultmann, Lamb, and Hall (2022) on formation for mission in Catholic education represents a positive step in this direction; their principles of accompaniment as a paradigm shift in the development of Catholic school leadership that operationalize the linking of mind, body, and spirit represent an acknowledgment of the possibilities of responding to the wellbeing and professional capacity of Catholic educators (Sultmann, Hall, & Lamb, 2024).

Of particular note, resources that specifically consider the holistic development of adults tend to focus on the formation of *teachers*. The formation of classroom educators is critical, of course, to the whole development of those entrusted to their care, but missing from such explorations are how other formators in a child's orbit (or

the proverbial childraising "village") are shaped, including parents, guardians, and other family members; athletic coaches; religious figures; co-curricular directors; school leaders and administrators; and others. While the formation of *all* formators eclipses the scope of this project, consideration of where educator formation and the holistic development of others intersect represents an area of further exploration.

The bodily dimensions of formation are referenced across the literature as a foundational element of holistic education, but further articulation of what such formation entails for adults and educators is needed. How should educators consider the role of their bodies – and not just their minds, or the ethical or spiritual dimensions of their lives – in helping to form learners? The Roche Center's framework for Whole Child education includes a physical dimension, and their *Playbook for Whole Child Education in U.S. Catholic Schools* (2025) cites a number of examples of how school communities cultivate the physical dimension of the person through nutrition, physical activity, and distinct approaches to art and physical education within the curriculum. What is needed is a deeper understanding of how the animating concepts behind those approaches might also be applied to the physical development of adult educators toward the core responsibilities of formative education.

While Groome and Dirkx offer insight into lifelong formation, more clarity is needed regarding what ongoing, sustained learning for adults involves. In particular, an understanding of the application of lifelong learning constructs to Christian and Catholic education contexts deserves more robust treatment. The professional and spiritual dimensions of educators' sustained development play notable roles in their formation, though a more holistic, and more nuanced, understanding of the ongoing learning needs of Christian and Catholic educators merit fuller exploration.

The research synthesized herein approaches a comprehensive perspective on adult formation for whole child education, but not without some notable limitations. Much of the research features a Western perspective – we note the majority of published works stemming from the United States and Europe – and also largely featuring male voices. There are opportunities to explore this work further and thus bring to light different ways of knowing, teaching, and learning and other perspectives (e.g. from marginalized, feminist, Southern Hemisphere orientations) in research.

Conclusion

The vocation of formation of whole children in Catholic schools requires an equal attentiveness to the formation of educators as whole persons. The demands inherent within that challenge coexist with the contemporary challenges faced by Catholic educators today, including, but not limited to, the prevalence of teacher burnout, a sense of professional and personal disconnection, and the desire to operate within educational contexts that

struggle with coherence and mission orientation (Wyttenbach et al, 2025). Just as Wyttenbach et al. (2025) posit the presence and utility of a conceptual framework for Whole Child education, a framework for "forming the formators" that encapsulates the dimensions of adult formation for Whole Child education can serve as a beacon for sustaining and amplifying the work of Catholic education today. Such a framework could contextualize renewed ways of proceeding in adult formation, identify high-leverage areas of growth for those tasked with creating the structures and processes that educators in Catholic schools engage in, and possibly inform the broader field of adult formation in education across contexts -- Catholic, faith-based, or secular. This review of the literature on adult formation for Whole Child education thus serves as an invitation to the field of Catholic education for critical reflection on what this framework might entail, how contemporary approaches to adult formation compare and contrast with the demands of a holistically-oriented adult formation, and where innovation in the space could help sustain the vocation of Catholic education over a lifetime. In accepting that invitation, the field of Catholic education responds definitively to Leo XIV's claim that "...to form the 'whole person' means avoiding compartmentalization…[generating] reciprocity, [overcoming] reductionism, and [opening] up to social responsibility" (Leo XIV, 2025).

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