PARTNERS IN LOS ANGELES CATHOLIC EDUCATION: COHORT MEMBERS' OPINIONS ABOUT THE THREE PILLARS OF THEIR ALTERNATIVE TEACHER CERTIFICATION PROGRAM FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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Abstract The purported teacher shortage impacting the United States has forced Catholic school systems nationwide to find innovative ways of recruiting individuals for whom education was not their original career of choice. One of the most successful efforts in this regard has been the development of Catholic university/(Arch)diocese partnerships offering said individuals the opportunity to teach in Catholic schools while earning academic degrees in Education. Cohort members of the Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education (PLACE)/Loyola Marymount University (LMU) partnership in Southern California participated in this 5ndo n5, which investigated their reasons for applying to PLACE as well as their opinions about the three pillars of the program (Professional Development, Intentional Community, and Ignatian Spirituality), during their two-year tenure in it. Participants singled out Intentional Community as the most appealing and supportive pillar of PLACE, emphasized the need for more Professional Development and training prior to their first teaching experience, and pleaded for more structure and guidance in their Spirituality sessions. Additional research on the benefits of shared community living 5ndo n the need for adequate professional training seems necessary to improve the preparation of novice teachers in alternative certification programs.

Keywords: PLACE, Catholic teachers, alternative certification, novice teachers, community living

Voices alerting impending teaching shortages in the US have been widely publicized over the last decades (Darling-Hammond, 1984; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Hussar, 1999). While some alarming calls

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have warned against a general shortfall resulting from a combination of low salaries, lack of adequate support for new teachers, the challenges of the job, misplacements in subject areas, or the increasing number of baby boomers approaching retirement (National Education Association, 1999; Quality Counts, 2000), more contained sources, on the other hand, have cautioned that the purported shortage appears to be circumscribed to specific subject specialists (Pennington & Trinidad, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2016). Notwithstanding these contradictory standpoints, evidence of a certain decrease in the number of teacher preparation program candidates and graduates has pushed public and private systems nationwide to seek innovative solutions to boost the numbers of qualified educators who can teach the nearly 60 million K-12 students in their schools (Riser-Kositsky, 2020). One such solution has been the development of alternative routes to certification, aimed at attracting to the profession individuals for whom teaching was not their original career of choice (Scribner & Heinen, 2009).

While a large majority of these programs have been developed by the public school system, the Catholic system has successfully created their own (Tamir, 2014; Williby, 2004). The latter's most significant accomplishment in this regard has been the establishment of nationwide partnerships between Catholic (arch)dioceses and Catholic universities offering recent graduates in all fields of study the opportunity to teach in under-resourced Catholic schools while concurrently earning academic degrees in Education. The partnerships are clustered under the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE), a mothership organization that "establishes and supports a collaborative cadre of Catholic colleges and universities as they design and implement graduate level teaching service programs for the purpose of supporting PK-12 Catholic education in the United States" (University Consortium for Catholic Education, 2020a).

The following pages address aspects of the purported teacher shortage in the United States and its impact on the Catholic school system; describe one specific UCCE partnership in Southern California, that between Loyola Marymount University (LMU) and Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education (PLACE); analyze members of the most recent PLACE cohort's reasons for applying to the program as well as their opinions about its three pillars (Professional Development, Intentional Community, and Ignatian Spirituality); and finalize with some conclusions, recommendations, and implications for further research.

Teacher shortages in the US

Warnings about teacher shortages in the United States have hit the headlines in recent decades. Some alerted about a general scarcity of educators (Hussar, 1999; National Education Association, 1999; Quality Counts, 2000; Shen, 1998; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016) while others rebated this argument under the premise that, "many who tell the teacher shortage story often consider teacher shortage data sources in isolation and tend to overgeneralize specific problems to the profession as a whole" (Pennington & Trinidad, 2019, p. 7). Among the latter,

Cowan et al. (2020) explain that the purported shortfall is due to the fact that schools and school districts only hire about 50% of teacher preparation program graduates despite a steady growth in graduation rates during the last three decades. Furthermore, for Cowan et al. (2020), while published data show a decline in the number of students enrolling in teacher preparation programs, or in the figures of college freshmen showing interest in majoring in education, the alleged shortage appears to be restricted to specific types of schools and subject areas, namely those serving disadvantaged students and/or located in rural settings among the former, and STEM and special education among the latter. Recent reports by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2020), Brock and Chatlain (2008), or Pennington and Trinidad (2019) add English as a Second Language and foreign language education to the latter list. Both analyses appeared to merge in Cross's (2017) thorough compendium of teacher shortage areas by state, as he identified bilingual education and English language acquisition, foreign language, Mathematics, reading specialists, Science, and Special Education as high-need areas in schools serving low-income students. Similar results can be found in this regard in a recent analysis of teacher turnover data in the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Surveys by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019).

Notwithstanding this ongoing controversy, a common recommendation for policy leaders in a majority of the aforementioned reports is the need to implement effective policies aimed at increasing the number of individuals attracted to, and retained, in the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, 1984; Pennington & Trinidad, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2016); for instance, establishing a national task force on teacher shortages to provide guidance based on existing research; implementing collaborative dialogues among affected parties about the issue and its potential solutions; examining current statewide data using rigorous studies providing real numbers, i.e., (bi)annual teacher supply-and-demand reports; and acting proactively by combining high-quality teacher shortage figures with coherent policies to attack the problem (Behrstock-Sherratt, 2016).

Teacher shortages in Catholic schools

The purported teacher shortfall has impacted both the public school system as well as its Catholic counterpart (Cimino, Haney, & Jacobs, 2000; Curtin, 2001; Przygocki, 2004). In his review of the research on teacher attrition and retention, Przygocki (2004) lists several factors contributing to this situation, namely an aging teaching force nearing retirement, increasing classroom sizes, work conditions, social and financial status, a decrease in the number of education majors, teacher training program graduates never becoming teachers or, if so, leaving the profession within the first five years, and what he describes as "erratic swings in the demand for entry-level teachers" (p. 525). To these, he also adds two unaccounted facts specifically affecting the recruiting and retaining of individuals by an already struggling Catholic system: The constant need for lay teachers as a result of a steady decrease in the numbers of religious community members in recent decades and lower financial compensation than their public school counterparts.

The noticeable decrease in religious vocations after 1960 made it necessary for Catholic schools to hire additional lay staff; this move resulted in an exponential increase in the figures of the latter, which reached ninety-five percent of the total teaching force in a majority of Catholic schools by the mid-1990s (Przygocki, 2004; Watzke, 2005). Differently from their religious counterparts, lay staff had the option of leaving their jobs upon the termination of their contracts, which continued to exacerbate the problem for Catholic school administrators, who felt compelled to find new replacements almost on an ongoing basis. In regards to the financial compensation aspect of the job, two contrasting views were apparent. On the one hand, Schuttloffel (2001) argues that the motivation to become a Catholic school teacher is rarely financial. In general, educators appear to be attracted to the Catholic school system for nonmaterial reasons, namely the spiritual component of the experience, commitment to the Catholic identity of the schools, higher rates of job satisfaction among private school than among public school teachers, or a combination of dedication, love of teaching, desire to teach in a quality environment, and consideration of teaching as a form of ministry (Bleich, 1984; Chubb & Moe, 1988; Groome, 1998; Guerra, 1991; Przygocki, 2004; Watzke, 2005). On the other hand, Curtin (2001) underlines Catholic schools' urge to offer competitive financial compensation and benefits to current and prospective teachers if they are intent on hiring and retaining qualified candidates. Unfortunately, existing salary differences between the public and the Catholic school systems, estimated by Curtin (2001) at around 37% in favor of public schools, make it difficult for Catholic schools to remain competitive in the field (Helm, 2001; O'Keefe & Traviss, 2000; Przygocki, 2004); overcoming the existing gap is therefore critical for a system in serious need of finding well-trained education professionals for its nearly 2,150,000 students (Cook & Engel, 2006; Riser-Kositsky, 2020).

Sidestepping the nonmaterial/financial conundrum, McNiff (2001) and Spring (2001) list various ways the Catholic system might be able to attract and retain qualified candidates: Using databases to reach out to potential educators, holding recruitment fairs, creating special programs for teacher interns and paraprofessionals, developing peer leadership and training sessions for current teachers, facilitating continuing education and off-site cohort experiences for current and future teachers, or preparing transitions to Catholic schools for retired public school teachers. Additional suggestions by Williby (2004) include hosting visitation programs; making teacher recruitment materials attractive and functional; providing explicit information about the selection process, the school calendar, salary, and benefits; providing testimonials by new teachers on their professional growth in Catholic schools or districts; or specifically remarking incentives that may increase schools' appeal. It was however the result of a combined effort by Catholic universities and (arch)dioceses nationwide starting two decades ago that resulted in a most ambitious plan to attract to the profession individuals for whom education was not their original career of choice. Following in the footsteps of similar efforts by the public school system, which had granted licenses through alternative certification programs to about 18% of its teachers in 2015-2016 (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2018), said universities and (arch)dioceses created their own alternative route to certification (University Consortium of Catholic Education, 2020b), an umbrella term describing a variety of programs run by universities, school districts, county offices of education, or private enterprises, designed to accelerate the credentialing process of future teachers (Mitchell & Romero, 2010; Scribner & Heinen, 2009). For Kennedy (2020), these programs are a viable solution to address teacher shortages, diversify the teacher force, and bolster teacher quality. Given the mission and values of Catholic education, the Catholic teacher education program with a specific must have a definite focus on the intentional mission in service to Catholic education (Watzke, 2005). This was the main objective of the Alliance for Catholic Education.

The Alliance for Catholic Education and the University Consortium for Catholic Education

Since its foundation in 1993, the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) at the University of Notre Dame was committed to sustaining, strengthening, and transforming K-12 Catholic schools through innovative practices aimed at forming talent, expanding access, enhancing school vitality, and conducting research on school improvement (ACE, 2020). With this purpose in mind, it established a teacher education program and M.A. in Education based on Catholic identity and educational mission, and specifically oriented toward the needs and challenges of Catholic K-12 schools (Watzke, 2005). The program and the degree were sustained on the three pillars of professional teaching, community, and spirituality, and relied on widely recognized best practices, namely long-term professional development, field-based learning, content-specific pedagogy, and student assessment for improved teacher practice (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998).

Encouraged by ACE's initial effort and success, 14 Catholic universities and teacher programs nationwide officially formed the University Consortium for Catholic Education in 2005 (University Consortium for Catholic Education, 2020b), with the purpose of building and supporting "a collaborative cadre of Catholic colleges and universities as they design and implement graduate level teaching service programs for the purpose of supporting PK-12 Catholic education in the United States" (University Consortium for Catholic Education, 2020a). These university/program partnerships focused on the development of "teacher preparation programs that would support Catholic education by recruiting and training faith-filled, energetic men and women to serve as teachers in the Catholic schools across the nation" (University Consortium for Catholic Education, 2020b). One such Southern California partnership is the one formed by Loyola Marymount University (LMU) and Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education (PLACE).

Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education (PLACE)

PLACE is a two-year service corps that assigns recent university graduates to teach in under-resourced K-12 Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Dioceses of Orange and

San Bernardino while completing academic coursework at LMU leading to an M.A. in Urban Education (embedding a California preliminary teaching credential) with a concentration on Language and Culture, Digital Technology, Literacy, or Policy and Administration.
PLACE applicants must possess a university degree, demonstrate a heart for service, have worked with young people, and show evidence of living their faith (PLACE, 2020a). Once accepted into the program, corps members (a.k.a. PLACErs) must comply with pre-established requirements related to its three pillars: Professional Development, Intentional Community, and Ignatian Spirituality. The pillars require they complete their academic preparation at LMU, live in shared communities, and participate in meetings to deepen their faith. According to a former director of the program, PLACE may be described as a combination of Teach for America, the Peace Corps, and the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (Ramos, 2012).

Intentional Community offers PLACErs the opportunity to fulfil the Jesuit ideal of servicing others and to celebrate and deepen their faith, spirituality, and comradeship. Accordingly, PLACErs live in eight remodeled convents, housing four to nine corps members each depending on capacity, located within the limits of the Los Angeles Archdiocese or the Diocese of San Bernardino. Assignments to the different communities are generally based on geographical reasons (proximity to assigned schools), professional affinities (similar subjects or grade levels taught), and personality types (based on application profiles and interviews during the selection process). Geography tends to rank first for the PLACE Director, given the impact of driving time in the Los Angeles area. Change requests are generally denied, as the administration of the program favors PLACErs work together to resolve conflicts and grow as individuals. Summer and fall annual retreats, as well as so-called business meetings held every other month, pursue similar objectives of familiarizing first- and second-year PLACErs with one another, with the meaning of the three pillars of PLACE, and with specific aspects of teaching in Catholic schools. The latter aspect is especially relevant for administrators given the lack of participants' prior preparation for working in Catholic schools, as well as their lack of knowledge of educational foundations, field-teaching experiences, and courses reflecting the history and traditions of Catholic education, something previously reported by the National Catholic Educational Association (1977) and Watzke (2002).

The number of candidates accepted into the program fluctuates yearly, depending on the size and quality of the applicant pool, yet cohorts tend to remain consistent within the 25-30 range. It is however the intention of the Director to increase these numbers in the future, given the demands of partner schools (A. Félix, personal communication, 11/4/2020). During its 20 years of operation, PLACE has accepted 448 graduates from 125 universities and 34 states nationwide, an outstanding 96% of whom have completed their two-year program commitment and approximately 78% of them remain in the profession as teachers, administrators, curriculum coaches, school site mentors, community support people, program retreat leaders, or alumni council representatives.

Given the consistency of the applicants' numbers and the high retention rate of alumni in education-related fields, it seems necessary to investigate some inherent characteristics of the program. The present project intended to do so by analyzing members of the most recent PLACE cohort's opinions about the following questions: What are the main reasons that make PLACE an attractive program for potential and current PLACErs? What are PLACErs' opinions about the three pillars of PLACE? What would PLACErs add to, or change in, PLACE?

Methodology

Participants

Initial participants in this project were the 34 members, 29 female and five male, of the 2018-2020 PLACE cohort. Their ages ranged from 20 to 31, with an average of 23.09. One male participant left the program prior to his first school placement and so did two females toward the end of their first year in it; the number of participants was hence 31, averaging 23.12 years of age.

Twenty-eight participants held B.A. degrees in a variety of fields, namely Liberal Studies, English, Psychology, Biological Science, Earth Science, International Business, Economics, Philosophy, Marketing, English, Spanish, History, and Interior Design among them. Only four of them had minors or concentrations in Elementary Education in their respective Childhood and Adolescent Development, Liberal Studies, Linguistics, and Psychology degrees. The three remaining participants held degrees in Elementary Education, Early Childhood Education, and Elementary Education and Special Education respectively, and were licensed to teach in Louisiana, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, respectively. Notwithstanding the widespread lack of previous educational background, all 31 participants had worked with children in various capacities and educational settings prior to applying to PLACE as teachers, substitute teachers, teacher aides, volunteers, tutors, coaches, or catechists. Noticeably, 21 of them had combined experiences as, for instance, substitute teacher, tutor, and student teacher; teacher aide and tutor; volunteer and counselor; or teacher aide, tutor, and catechist.

Of the 19 participants placed in elementary schools, nine were assigned to teach in K through 3rd grades, seven in 4th and 5th grades, and the remaining three were to teach various subjects in 3rd/4th, 3rd/4th/5th, and 3rd/4th/5th/6th grades, respectively. Four and five participants respectively were to teach Science, Social Studies, English Language Arts, or Physical Education in 5th/6th/7th/8th or 6th/7th/8th grade combinations. The last three participants were to provide Geometry and/or Algebra instruction in high school.

Instruments and Data collection

Upon receiving the required university's IRB authorization to conduct the project[1], the author and the PLACE Director contacted the members of the 2018-2020 PLACE cohort to request their participation in it. The initial design of the project called for participants to respond to four questionnaires administered at four different points in time during their PLACE tenure: July of

2018, a few days prior to their first school placements, and December of 2018, June of 2019, and June of 2020, toward the end of their first semester and first and second year in the classroom, respectively. The first questionnaire gathered background information about the participants and enquired on their main reasons for applying to PLACE. Questionnaires two, three, and four, for their part, intended to evaluate the impact of each pillar of PLACE (Professional Development, Intentional Community, and Ignatian Spirituality) on their personal/professional lives up to the date of their respective administration. The rationale for these four checkpoints was to identify potential variations in participants' opinions about the three pillars of PLACE during their two-year tenure in it. Some purposefully sampled participants (Patton, 2002), identified by the author as "information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest" (Palinkas et al., 2015), were also to join him in either individual interviews or focus group sessions in June of 2020. These meetings would offer participants the opportunity to reflect on their PLACE tenure from a more encompassing angle, which included their confirming or reevaluating their original reasons for applying to PLACE, as well as potential suggestions for improving the program. Unfortunately, the sudden spread of the COVID-19 virus and the subsequent restrictions placed on schools, teachers, and students, forced the author to alter the final stage of the project substantially. Faced with the impossibility of conducting face-to-face gatherings, he emailed participants the fourth questionnaire at the end of June, 2020, and held the five individual meetings and two focus group sessions via Zoom in mid-July of the same year. He asked all participants to just refer to their pre-COVID-19 experiences when responding to the fourth questionnaire and during the interviews and focus groups to prevent the massive impact of the virus from tainting their responses. Unfortunately, only the 14 participants not personally or professionally impacted by the pandemic were able to return their responses to the fourth questionnaire and accept their participation in the meetings and focus groups. The author emailed them the topics for the latter one day in advance to give them time to reflect on their responses and facilitate their staying on topic once on camera.

Data analysis

Participants' responses to the questionnaires and the videorecorded individual meetings and focus groups were content analyzed (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) by the author shortly after their respective date of completion or meeting. He color-coded the responses according to the order in which they were written or uttered. When more than one response was provided within the same sentence, for instance, "PLACE offers a great opportunity to get teaching experience while living in a community", he coded teaching experience as the first response, community living second. He then created separate Excel files to record participants' responses to each question, except when the same question was included in different questionnaires, meetings, or focus groups. In this case, he recorded the responses on the same file to facilitate comparisons and cross-referencing. He then clustered the findings under the following headings: Reasons for applying to PLACE; Opinions about the pillars; and Suggestions for the future.

Findings

The first two subsections below, Reasons for applying to PLACE and Opinions about the pillars, present participants' responses to the questionnaires first, followed by selected comments during the individual interviews and focus group sessions. The third subsection, Suggestions for the program, summarizes responses to the similarly phrased question only included in the fourth questionnaire and discussed during the individual interviews and focus group sessions.

Reasons for applying to PLACE

This question, included in the first questionnaire and posed as a discussion topic in the individual interviews and focus groups with a slight modification as "Would the same reasons apply now?", intended to explore participants' original reasons for applying to PLACE, as well as their confirmation or reevaluation of said reasons at the end of their participation in the program.

Twelve of the 31 respondents to the first questionnaire explained that they had applied to PLACE given their desire to become teachers in Catholic environments while 10 others specifically alluded to PLACE or its pillars. The remaining responses included the opportunity to earn an academic degree; living in a Catholic community; impacting students' lives; the potential for traveling; fighting stereotypes of first-generation students; or the absence of Math male teachers in secondary education. Just the two most frequent reasons are addressed next.

Vocation

Participants applying to PLACE because of a self-declared teaching vocation did so because of the opportunity to share their long-standing religious beliefs with students or because of what they considered a logical transition from their studying in Catholic schools to becoming teachers in the system. In either case, applying to a program donning a Spirituality pillar housed in a university institutionally committed to Catholicism seemed to them the most cogent step to fulfil their aspirations. While most participants in this group used expressions such as "to serve Christ" or "teach while also serving God" to reveal their strong desire to share their Catholic background and faith with their students, there were those who admitted the need for the incorporation of the principles of Catholicism into their own lives. One participant illustrated her own personal take on the issue when explaining that she had applied to PLACE because, "I longed for my religious integration of Catholicism, which I knew PLACE has".

Acquaintance with PLACE and/or its pillars

Eight of the 10 participants making specific references to PLACE or its pillars had learned about the program prior to submitting their applications either from acquaintances or as a result of their own research. Those in the former group had been mostly encouraged to apply by friends or colleagues who were also applicants themselves, by alumni, or by members of other programs for Catholic personnel at LMU, such as CAST[2]. One participant learned about PLACE unexpectedly,

upon realizing that some fellow teachers were already members of the program: "I had always known I wanted to help people, but never knew how to. PLACE had apparently been part of my life, with most of the teachers in my elementary school being PLACErs without my knowing".

On the other hand, participants conducting their own research appeared to have been guided by their desire to find a program that met their personal, professional, and/or spiritual needs. Some in this group seemed to have initiated their search with just a vague idea of what they were looking for, stating for instance that, "I wanted to be part of a program that combined my lifelong dream of being a teacher with the aspect of intentional community"; others, in contrast, explained much more specifically how PLACE matched what they were looking for: "I fell in love with PLACE as soon as I researched the program. I have always wanted to become a teacher, and through this program I'll be a part of a wonderful community, teach my faith, and earn a Master's". Among respondents alluding to any or all of the PLACE pillars, the Community Living/Professional Development amalgam was an attractive combination that would provide the necessary emotional and professional safety net they needed to start their endeavor: "I was eager to begin grad school, but I also wanted to begin my profession as an elementary school teacher… I also applied because I wanted to work/study/live alongside other individuals who shared a similar passion". Notwithstanding isolated references to Professional Development, Community Living stood out as the pillar exerting the most appeal for applicants, due to its potential for the creation of support networks in their transition to a complex adventure. For a first-generation university student and first-time job seeker, for instance, it was essential to not feel alone in her first job experience: "I knew that the first year of teaching will be challenging, which is why I liked the intentional aspect of being in a community". Surprisingly, only one participant named Spirituality as her reason for applying to the program, as she "had strayed from God for so long".

Interestingly, not a single individual interview or focus group participant ascribed to their original responses when asked whether their original motifs for applying to PLACE still held on. Rather, they unanimously pointed to Community Living as the real reason for doing so, due to the sense of togetherness and comradeship generated by what was described as "having a family around" or having "other people in your shoes as friends and support". The invaluable benefits of so-called "therapy sessions" in their shared living arrangements, during which community members opened up to each other and developed intense personal and professional relationships as a result, allowed participants to gain a deeper understanding of both selves and others. For one participant, the most important outcome of these emerging connections was that, "you got to see the person behind them, not just the student, the professional teacher, the PLACEr,… but actually the person who is learning and struggling… it humanizes people a lot". Community Living was also consistently regarded as PLACE's main selling point for future applicants.

The consistent presence and involvement of program administrators was also acknowledged in the interviews and focus groups as an additional strong component of PLACE. Comments lauded administrators' willingness to support participants once in the program, their contribution to the development of participants' community building skills, their hands-on approach to the resolution of potential sources of conflict, and their availability to intervene whenever circumstances demanded arbitration or mediation. Their constant engagement throughout the two years of the program made the experience more tolerable for all:

> [Program administrators] were real. I met them and I understood what the program would be like… no matter how things ended up actually turning out, at least the C-18's[3] really understood and appreciated the level of work and care that was put into by the people that ran our program... I think as a cohort, it was really our experience of liking PLACE corps no matter how difficult it was because we knew that there were people who would be thinking about us.

Opinions about the pillars

This subsection presents a summary of participants' opinions about the impact of each PLACE pillar on their personal/professional lives. The question was included in Questionnaires 2, 3, and 4, and posed as a discussion topic in the individual interviews and focus groups to allow PLACErs to elaborate on it in retrospect. The pillars are presented in the order in which they appear on the different pages of PLACE's website (i.e., PLACE, 2020a; PLACE, 2020b).

Professional Development

Participants appeared to be unevenly divided between those who thought that the preparation received prior to entering the classroom did not suffice to overcome the challenges they faced on a daily basis and those who seemed content with said preparation. Based on sheer numbers, those ascribing to the first group overwhelmingly surpassed those in the second, as 18 of the 26 participants responding to the question in the second questionnaire, 22 of the 28 respondents to the third questionnaire, and 10 of the 14 respondents to the fourth questionnaire sided with the first view. In their comments, they noted existing deficiencies in various areas of their new trade, such as curriculum/lesson plan development, implementation of state-required academic standards, strategies for specific grade levels, handling students' behavioral issues, strengthening home-school relations, or knowledge of school financials. The following comment is representative of the widely acknowledged need for more and better preparation, something that did not seem feasible for some during just a short summer crash course:

> To be honest, I did not feel prepared when I first started. In some ways, I actually wish the program was three years and the first year was mentorship in a real classroom. I think summer should be two months of real-world experience in a summer classroom with a mentor teacher.

On the other hand, those who felt sufficiently prepared made general references to the wide variety of resources compiled during their summer training, which they used later in their classrooms. Balancing both views, some participants attributed their professional frustrations to their novice teaching status, which deprived from the necessary know-how to use the resources at hand effectively; for one such participant, the situation was bound to improve once they spent more time in the classroom: "I don't think there's anything more PLACE could have done. I think growth with classroom management and teaching comes with experience and remembering that students need structure". A second participant, for her part, blamed her own initial attitude for some of her ensuing plights: "I felt that the preparation was well rounded if I had listened more openly!".

The ongoing discrepancy on the issue remained present in the individual meetings and focus group sessions. Favorable comments toward the preparation received iterated the wide variety of resources compiled during the various training sessions and university courses attended, while criticisms focused on the need for a more practical slant in the content of presentations and summer and credential coursework. One participant provided a well-balanced analysis of the situation, as well as a few personal suggestions to overcome existing gaps in the professional preparation realm:

> Lesson and unit plans [were helpful] because we did cover it, but it was very vague. Every school does have different expectations for them and the on-site support and LMU observer were very helpful, but I think some practice with standards, textbook resources, and planning would have been more helpful. Assessments too. Also, I felt unprepared to handle students with varying needs. Differentiation and more about special education/plans would be beneficial… I do believe more engaging and hands-on classes would have been amazing for us and less lecture-based only classes. Especially since we are in school for so long on Saturdays. Some of our classes talk about how to best engage students and improve learning, but we are learning all of this through lecture rather than experience.

Intentional Community

The following quote, uttered in one focus group, summarized the general agreement about the positive impact of Community Living on participants' personal and professional lives:

> People who aren't teachers don't understand the realities of what it is like to be a teacher, and so to be able to come back home from a day that could have been the worst day or the best day… with fellow teachers and be able to talk about your day… those are people who understand what it's like whether they had that good of a day also and they could celebrate with you or they had just as bad of a day and you could cry together...

Interestingly, while references to Community Living were scarce in Questionnaires 2 and 3 given participants' escalating concerns about the quality of their professional preparation, all 14

participants completing the fourth questionnaire and a majority of those in the individual interviews and focus groups singled it out, as previously noted, as the most valuable PLACE pillar and best-selling component of PLACE. In fact, just two participants in the individual interviews and two more in the focus groups referred to Professional Development as the most relevant pillar in their career, although two of them did so hesitantly. The first one chose it over Community Living due to a few negative episodes in her community while the second one found it almost impossible to disentangle the combined effects of Community Living and Professional Development. For her, they both went hand in hand, yet she thought that program administrators favored the latter over the former, given it hence an extra push: "Community Living naturally unfolds, but they [PLACE administrators] put more into the Professional Development because part of the community is supporting a professional life".

Community Living noticeably overshadowed the two other PLACE pillars during participants' second year in the program, once their initial classroom predicaments became more limited in scope thanks to a combination of extended classroom experience and community support. The latter aspect gained increased recognition as participants learned to enjoy the benefits of "unplanned, unstructured time" with others whenever in need. Thus, for one participant, "all you needed to do was holler and, at any time, there were seven different people you could ask for help". The growing sense of solidarity resulting from these meetings tightened bonds among community members, gave them the necessary reassurance on their teaching capabilities, and increased their self-confidence as educators:

> Being surrounded by fellow first year teachers and also experienced teachers helped so much during my time in PLACE. I always felt like I had someone to go to with questions and was always receiving advice and resources. I am so grateful for this. I never felt alone and always felt like I was growing to be the best teacher I could be for my students.

Some additional unexpected outcomes resulting from these heart-to-heart sessions were, for instance, the decision by two local participants to forego visiting their families during annual celebrations as a show of camaraderie and companionship with the not-so-fortunate members of their respective communities. Both of them spoke of the guilt they would have experienced otherwise. Along these lines, another participant found it increasingly difficult to excuse her absences from mandatory community activities and meetings even when tempted to do so because of the potentially negative effects of her decision on other corps members:

> In a way we get to know who can help others and we are kind of just growing… but it also makes it more difficult because, you know, you are living with the people that are going through this program with and you cannot really say no because how they would feel… you have to say yes to everything and when you say no, [you think] who are you are going to harm?

Overall, the time devoted to lauding the benefits of Community Living during the interviews and focus group sessions more than tripled that dedicated to the other pillars. It was during one of these sessions that a participant shared an aspect of the Community Living structure in PLACE that constituted a clear advantage over other UCCE programs. As she explained, "they [communities] are all within the same area. For example, two convents could be 10 minutes away from each other, while in other programs you are three states away". Despite time-consuming driving distances in the Los Angeles area, the proximity of the convents to one another allowed her, and the rest of her cohort members in general, to participate in regularly scheduled program meetings, as well as to join unexpected or emergency gatherings with other participants on an as-needed basis. This was more difficult to accomplish in other programs due to the spread of the communities, which required corps members embark on long car or plane trips to attend in-person gatherings or join on-screen meetings with colleagues or administrators. These barriers prevented members from getting to know each other better and more deeply, and this tipped the scale in favor of PLACE as the program of choice for a second participant. For her, by not modeling their respective Community Living pillars after PLACE's, other UCCE partnerships were depriving their corps members of a chance to:

> Feel quite the level of relationship that we feel with each other for good or bad, because they are not actually living with each other and you can't mimic that… like I feel more of a tie to the program than I would if it were just like a teacher education program I was taking classes through.

Ignatian Spirituality

Given the unanticipated demands of their jobs and the new responsibilities resulting from their joint living arrangements, it did not seem surprising that participants sidestepped Spirituality in favor of the two other pillars despite the former's purported relevance in a Catholic-inspired program. Notwithstanding, several comments during the interviews and focus group meetings revealed participants' acceptance of the pillar, yet offering significantly different interpretations of its meaning as well as how to abide by it. On the one hand, participants with a strong Catholic background associated Spirituality to praying together, attending mass, and deepening their Catholic faith, in compliance with the explanation posted on one page of the program's website: "Program members live with one another in intentional community while exploring and strengthening shared values rooted in Catholicism" (PLACE, 2020b); on the other hand, non-Catholic participants or Catholic participants with not-so-strong Catholic backgrounds presented a more encompassing view of Spirituality as "a time for us to get together and reflect, to stop thinking about teaching for a moment… and then come back and see things differently", more in line with another description posted on another page of the same website: "Program members live together in intentional communities supporting and mentoring one another, sharing their faith,

and growing spiritually in the Jesuit tradition of being 'men and women with and for others'" (PLACE, 2020c). Conflicts subsequently surged between members of each faction on the correct interpretation of the implications of the term. For one participant in the first group, for instance, "the pillar was not community-aligned. Since everyone in the program is at different places in their spiritual life, sometimes the planned spiritual events can be a little fluffy and I don't think there is that much structure in them". Two more participants in the same group supported this view, thinking it urgent for community support personnel to monitor Spirituality nights more closely and provide specific guidance and structure to the meetings. For them, all participants had been informed of the relevance of the pillar as an inherent component of PLACE during their initial interviews and the summer retreat and were therefore aware that "PLACE calls itself a Catholic program and you sign up for it". On the other hand, those in the second group argued that, since the program was not restricted to just Catholic applicants, all participants should be open to more lax interpretations of the term by current and future PLACErs of diverse ethnic, religious, cultural, or sexual backgrounds. One such participant believed that exposure to different points of view during Spirituality nights would open up participants' minds to alternative ways of living in diverse societies and "make them [the talks] more substantial by analyzing them in depth" despite potential reservations by some.

Suggestions for the future

This question was only included in the fourth questionnaire and discussed in the individual interviews and focus groups with the purpose of giving participants the opportunity to look back in retrospect to their two years in PLACE. Responses, clustered together according to their references to each PLACE pillar, are presented under the following headings: Community Living and PLACE, Preparation prior to teaching, and Dealing with Spirituality.

Community Living and PLACE

Despite overwhelmingly laudatory comments about Community Living, a few suggestions were offered for program administrators to improve the pillar. Firstly, some participants proposed giving more weight to enrollment in similar M.A. concentrations and/or grade levels or subjects taught at the time of assigning future PLACErs to their respective communities. One supporter of this position, citing her own experience, explained that the arrangement would help establish fruitful professional relationships among PLACErs from the very beginning and throughout the length of their tenure: "Coming home to other people who understand all facets of the complexity of teaching made it possible to get through the two years". Secondly, a few general comments wanted to make administrators aware of the enormous pressure participants were subject to while attempting to juggle the numerous commitments demanded by PLACE, namely attendance at community events, Masses, retreats, and business meetings; organizational responsibilities in their communities; and assignments and readings pertaining to their academic coursework; all the while performing successfully in the classroom. During their first year in the program, participants felt they were

"spread very thin" as they struggled to navigate many different scenarios. While frustrations derived from their inexperience receded during their second year, the academic rigor of their M.A. courses[4] resulted in skyrocketing stress levels. Given the Type A personality of so many participants, "meltdowns were therefore a not-so-uncommon occurrence" in the communities. These unfortunate episodes were more noticeable when responsibilities associated to the three PLACE pillars coincided simultaneously, which forced participants be torn between attempting to comply with all stated requirements or focus their energies on specific commitments to the detriment of others. Thus, as one participant explained, "Were some requirements had to be eliminated, it would not be PLACE... however, there were a lot of mandatory assignments, and attending PLACE events when in my mind I was thinking of homework or of other places…" Holding joint meetings with administrators to reevaluate what were deemed nonessential commitments was a potential solution to resolve this quandary. Hiring mental health specialists to help participants achieve a better personal/professional balance was another. A third suggestion called for a more proactive stand on the part of administrators toward schools demanding participants attend activities clashing with specific pillar requirements, such as Saturday back-to-back university courses, attendance to Mass, or participation in community meetings. For one participant, "PLACE needs to set the expectation with schools that PLACErs are not just regular teachers who are attending school on the weekends". However, a few other participants felt that administrators were reticent to intervene to avoid straining relationships with partnership schools.

Preparation prior to teaching

Participants' apprehension about their initial inadequacy to succeed in the classroom resulted from what one of them described as "the huge jump" from a month and a half of mostly theoretical instruction during the summer prior to their first teaching assignment to the realities of the job shortly afterward. Various focus group participants called for a more practical slant in the content of their summer and credential coursework to address this issue, which included explicit adaptations of the material learned in class to specific grades and subject areas, time to work on some of the most time-consuming state-required credential requirements, such as the Teacher Performance Assessments (TPAs), or specific information on how to teach vulnerable populations, i.e., bilingual students or Students with Special Needs. Another common suggestion was the recruitment of veteran teachers or PLACE alumni currently working as school principals or administrators, curriculum supervisors, or academic counselors to provide mentorship and conduct practical workshops on much-needed areas, such as reading/teaching methods, implementation of grade level standards, ways to improve relationships with parents and administrators, or test score and data interpretation. This, in lieu of sporadic training sessions that made participants feel they were just being "spoken to". Along these lines, one participant contributed a few suggestions she felt could make said preparation more applicable to their respective individual scenarios:

> Give concrete examples, and show rather than just tell. Less theory, more demonstration of a real-classroom. I wanted a more practical focus: How real teachers organize their paper system, deal with difficult parents, and what content I should be teaching in Language Arts. What I struggled with the most in my first year of teaching was classroom management, the daily organization of teaching and the paper flow and small decisions of the day-to-day, and trying to keep up with a huge amount of grading in a fair and accurate manner. When we "practiced" classroom management in class, we practiced with each other, which I found relatively easy to do because obviously everyone in the class was an adult pretending to be a kid. However, real-life classes were a lot more difficult and unpredictable. I may have been able to ace a classroom management test, but that did not mean I actually knew what to do in real-life situations. I think it would have been helpful to also have "soft skills", like examples of organizational methods and ways to set-up the paper system. I also think I would spend more time on content specific courses. For example, "How to teach students to write an essay", or "Quick ways to organize feedback", or "Examples of novels I've taught for middle school", or "Examples of lesson ideas for this subject". Any tangible resources or examples that could be sent for people to view would have been helpful, so PLACErs did not have to create their own resources or buy them. For example, for the content of the subjects, I came to a school that had no curriculum, which meant I spent all of my time trying to figure out what I was supposed to teach and what to do with it. It would have been nice to have someone show examples of real-life lesson plans and how they constructed their week. Perhaps we could make a curriculum map in summer to plan the lessons/materials. I also think that I would take away anything "fluffy" or political and really focus on practical and real-life concrete examples.

Dealing with Spirituality

As noted, discrepancies over the purpose and goals of Spirituality led those participants with the deepest Catholic beliefs to contest Catholic-in-name and non-Catholic participants' commitment to the pillar. Those in the former group were noticeably more outspoken when voicing the need to "hold people to their commitments", as they thought the latter considered Spirituality meetings just an opportunity to discuss a wider variety of themes, not necessarily related or constrained to Catholicism or the Catholic faith. For one of the most vocal critics of the latter, Spirituality would not become the vibrant component of community life she was expecting upon joining PLACE unless administrators gave it the push and recognition it deserved:

> The expectation [ought] to not just be that people are open to Spirituality, but that they are seeking it… because when we got into community, everybody is open to the rules, and it was very uncomfortable not to live in a community where we value the same things at the end of the day.

Discussion

A majority of participants acknowledged their familiarity with PLACE far in advance of filling out their applications, mostly as a result of conversations with friends, colleagues, or alumni, or of their

own research on alternative teaching programs for Catholic schools. The opportunity to share their faith, fulfil their teaching vocation, or complete the requirements for an academic degree and a teaching credential, all the while earning a salary were, in this order, the main reasons for their interest in the program. The two most frequently cited reasons, the wish to serve God or teach the Catholic faith, were consistent with research pointing to the Catholic identity and mission values of Catholic schools as the main forces attracting individuals to teach in the Catholic system (Caruso, 2002; Groome, 1998). However, shortly after their first contact with the classroom, participants began to experience the effects of their lack of adequate preparation, the increasing pressure to perform, and the continuous doubts about their professional capabilities. These deficiencies, consistent with previous research on the issue (Linek et al, 2012), eventually led them to substitute Community Living for the initial religious component of their choice as their preferred motivation for applying to PLACE. In offering the personal and professional support and mentoring needed to get a better handle of their new jobs, Community Living fulfilled its key program goals (PLACE, 2020c). The strengthened bonds among participants resulting from their community interactions was an essential ingredient in their overcoming their perceived inadequacies and becoming better professionals. In this regard, the internal setup of the communities and the latter's proximity to one another gained steady recognition as two critical constituents of PLACE. Frequent comments stressed the importance of being surrounded by colleagues of the same age, holding similar jobs, and in some cases teaching identical grades and subject areas, with whom to connect in search of information, company, and comfort and with whom to share frustrations, challenges, and also successes. Some UCCE programs spread their partnerships over various cities and even states (i.e., ACE, 2020; University of Dayton, 2020), and this made holding joint meetings with all corps members a complicated task; the proximity of participants' communities to one another and to LMU, where PLACE's administrative office was housed, was on the contrary an additional plus for PLACE. The arrangement facilitated participants' mobility between communities and fostered the development of closer personal and professional connections with other corps members and program administrators, as evidenced in participants' persistent use of words and phrases such as comradeship, camaraderie, or not feeling alone, which helped them fight the burning sensation of loneliness caused by the isolating nature of teaching (Marshall et al., 2007; Tahir et al., 2017). Along these lines, the benefits of Community Living were comparable to those of existing Living Learning Communities (LLCs)[5] established in some colleges nationwide. These accommodations have shown important benefits for students residing in them, namely boosting retention and degree completion rates, improving learning and interactions with faculty and others, and increasing students' engagement in and outside the classroom (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Eidum et al., 2020). Save for natural differences between the two scenarios and potential difficulties for its implementation on a large scale, the model remains an innovative option for supporting novice teachers during their initial stages in the profession.

Despite participants' laudatory comments about Community Living as the stalwart of the program, two areas may require programs' administrators' direct intervention to maintain its status as such. Firstly, there did not seem to be clear policies regulating attendance to family gatherings; administrators may thereby consider drafting a document on attendance policies to such events to prevent what might be perceived as purely discretionary decisions otherwise. Secondly, administrators might also consider holding meetings with current and former PLACErs to review existing program requirements and reach satisfactory compromises on what might be considered non-essential tasks. Juggling their combined responsibilities as students in a degree program, as professionals in a demanding job, and as individuals fulfilling numerous community commitments increased participants' stress levels that lead to frequent mental breakdowns. Future PLACErs would certainly welcome the hiring of mental health counselors and specialists, as suggested, to provide immediate assistance on an ongoing as well as on as-needed basis. Any additional support in the area of wellbeing for both novice and veteran teachers makes the teaching experience easier to bear (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018; Turner & Theilking, 2019; Viac & Fraser, 2020).

In contrast to the almost unanimous recognition of Community Living as the undisputedly most valuable pillar of PLACE, both Professional Development and Spirituality were subject to more serious scrutiny. The former, for the apparent lack of participants' adequate preparation in critical areas of their practice, namely curriculum and lesson development or classroom management skills, and the criticized disconnect between the theoretical content of the summer training and credential coursework and its practical application to the classroom. Spirituality criticisms mostly referred for its part to specific claims for clarification of the pillar's role, meaning, and structure in a Catholic-oriented program.

Most participants voiced weaknesses in their professional preparation as early as the end of their first semester in PLACE. As soon as the realities of teaching sank in, they self-reported deficiencies in crucial areas such as classroom management skills, lesson development and delivery techniques, and implementation of content standards, that caused ongoing frustrations and doubts about their teaching abilities and their capacity to perform. In so doing, their narratives seemed to confirm existing distrust on the preparation of teachers in alternative certification programs expressed by critics of these programs (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Scherer, 2012).

In reality, these limitations, generally stretching the length of their first academic year, were not specifically pertinent to PLACE itself, as they were really related to the content of state-required credential coursework; this precluded PLACE administrators and course instructors from altering said content to make it more suitable and applicable to participants' specific teaching needs. Notwithstanding, participants felt instructors still had room for the introduction of a more functional slant in the coursework. Allowing time for small homogeneous and heterogenous group work on practical tasks and research projects tailored to specific grades or subject areas and the inclusion of time-consuming credential requirements such as the edTPAs as course assignments to

curtail the number of after class hours dedicated to their completion were considered beneficial modifications for future PLACErs, who would also benefit from solid guidance and rapid and frequent feedback on their progress. Given that, in addition to a flexible curriculum, assistance from experts and support providers is another reason why teachers continue in the profession (Johnson, 2006), recruiting alumni to provide practical personal and professional advice to future PLACErs on some of the already noted areas of need also seemed a commonsensical suggestion. More than 80% of said alumni remain in education upon the completion of their PLACE tenure as teachers in Catholic and public schools, program leaders, school principals, alumni council representatives, instructional and curriculum coaches, school site mentors, or doctoral program graduates in educational administration or school policy (PLACE, 2020c; Ramos, 2012). Their broad range of experiences constitutes hence an invaluable asset in the prevention of potential failures by their novice colleagues; the PLACE motto, "Once a PLACEr, always a PLACEr" (Ramos, 2012, p. 9), ensures their availability to lend a hand.

Lastly, PLACE administrators may take into consideration participants' suggestions to clarify the expectations for Spirituality in light of participants' existing dissent about the meaning of the pillar. This issue demands their hasty intervention to avoid further controversies caused by discordant interpretations among participants of statements such as "living in faith-filled communities" or "sharing their faith and growing spiritually in the Jesuit tradition of being men and women with and for others" (PLACE, 2020c). Increasing their presence or that of community support personnel on Spirituality nights was a sensible idea, as they could provide the necessary guidance to ascertain a uniform understanding and application of the basic premises of the pillar in the communities. Including in the discussions some of the non-Catholic PLACErs' requests and analyzing them from the standpoint of Catholic v. other religious or philosophical adscriptions may offer future PLACErs the opportunity to compare and contrast how these topics are contemplated by individuals holding different spirituality, moral, and ethic viewpoints, learn from and about those holding different opinions and experiences, respect alternative points of view, discuss the pros and cons of different societies' values and lifestyles, and hone their own debating skills, all the while giving more weight to the pillar in their communities and in the program.

Conclusion

Participants in the present project singled out Community Living as the most valuable pillar of PLACE and the most important contributor to the success of the program. Living in close communities surrounded by colleagues sharing similar experiences helped participants keep afloat while learning to navigate the different worlds of schools, academia, and shared living. Notwithstanding their initial struggles juggling their duties in these three different scenarios, being able to rely on others to cope with adversities and share successes resulted in the development of solid relationships that helped participants endure their novice teacher status. On the other hand, concerns about the extent of their professional preparation was the source of personal and

professional frustrations, more conspicuous during participants' first year in the program. Resorting to PLACE alumni for guidance and advice seemed a sensible solution to attenuate mistakes and self-perceptions of failure. The hiring of mental health specialists and conversations with program administrators on the relevance of some mandatory requirements were also valid requests to make the beginning stages of PLACE more tolerable. Lastly, administrators' and community personnel's more consistent involvement in Spirituality meetings might help lessen existing discrepancies among PLACErs regarding the meaning and significance of the term.

The findings of this project are limited to the opinions of the participants in it. Alumni and future PLACErs might hold different opinions about the program itself or its pillars as a result of their own personal/professional experiences in schools, in their communities, and/or with administrators. Members of other UCCE partnerships might also hold different opinions about their own programs and experiences as teachers in Catholic schools. It is also necessary to consider the impact of the COVID-19 virus upon the last stages of the study. The pandemic severely restricted the number of participants responding to the fourth questionnaire and participating in the individual meetings and focus groups; some of the original purposefully selected participants might have held different perspectives on the topics discussed. The virus also forced the author to hold the interviews and focus group sessions remotely instead of in-person; this modified format might have affected the interaction between the participants as well as the depth of their exchanges. Lastly, despite repeated requests for participants to just take into consideration their pre-COVID experiences, their extended home confinement, which limited their contact with students and other participants, as well as the impact of the virus on their lives might have tainted their responses.

In light of the findings of the study, it seems necessary to continue to explore future PLACErs' opinions about aspects related to the three pillars of PLACE besides those revealed here. Future research may revolve for example around issues such as how PLACErs' views about the structure and implementation of the three PLACE pillars compare across different cohorts or with members' of other UCCE programs, whether Community Living continues to be recognized as the most important pillar of PLACE, how teacher recruitment and retention rates in programs incorporating shared living opportunities compare with others not offering this arrangement, what potential modifications in the content of the summer courses or credential coursework might improve the professional preparation of future PLACErs, or how existing interpretations of "share their faith and grow spiritually in the Jesuit tradition of being 'men and women with and for others'" may still comply with Spirituality. In the present project, the availability of supportive colleagues built up the support network helping participants to overcome the ongoing challenges of their new jobs, providing evidence in so doing of the importance of a supportive environment for beginning teachers. Teaching is an isolating and challenging profession and any effort aimed at lessening frustrations is a worthy contribution in a field in which success is hard to achieve.

Notes

[1] The project was part of a larger study on participants' potentially evolving opinions about teaching in general as well as their own teaching expectations throughout their PLACE tenure. Therefore, only those comments deemed relevant for the present project are discussed and analyzed subsequently.

[2] Catholic Archdiocesan School Teachers (CAST) is a cohort program for full-time current K-12 Catholic teachers or administrators at LMU leading to an MA in Urban Education embedding a California Preliminary Teaching Credential.

[3] Cohort 18

[4] In PLACErs' 1+1 M.A./credential program, credential courses were completed in year 1, master courses in year 2

[5] Groups of students "who live on the same floor of a residential hall and who share an interest in a common theme or major" (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016, p. 1)

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