Crisis Leadership: Voices from the Field

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Abstract: This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach and the Marianist characteristics as a conceptual framework to understand the experiences of six lay Marianist educational leaders during COVID-19. Findings indicate that, during the pandemic, leaders were faced with specific challenges: receiving an excess of information, facing inequity in technology, serving students with various learning needs, and attending to the socioemotional health of students and teachers. Despite these difficulties, the leaders were able to uphold the Marianist characteristics of educating for adaptation and change, in family spirit, and for formation in faith. This study is significant because it provides unique perspectives on how leaders of a Marianist urban high school were able to advance their mission during a global health pandemic. The study also adds to the crisis and Marianist leadership bodies of literature

Keywords: crisis leadership, Marianist education, mission advancement, COVID-19, urban high school

In spring of 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. When schools shut down due to COVID-19, the switch to mandatory remote learning disproportionately affected students whose families were socioeconomically disadvantaged and students with various learning needs, such as learners on individualized education plans (IEPs) as well as English Language Learners (ELL; Galea & Abdalla, 2020; Storey & Slavin, 2020). Private schools faced these challenges, as well. Additionally, many private institutions struggled to maintain their enrollment and to distinguish themselves from more affordable online options, such as those provided by the public and charter school systems. According to Wodon (2020), Catholic

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schools in the United States were particularly vulnerable, due to the price of private, faith-based education and affordability issues that had already caused a decrease in enrollment prior to COVID-19 (Wodon, 2020). For Marianist school leaders, the pandemic provided an opportunity to reinvent the way they enacted the Marianist principles, both in an online environment and in person with social distancing regulations.

This qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of lay Marianist high school leaders during COVID-19. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) How did previous crisis experiences prepare leaders to lead and advance their Marianist mission during COVID-19? (2) What challenges did they face in upholding the Marianist characteristics related to educating for adaptation and change, educating in family spirit, and educating for formation in faith? (3) How, if at all, did they manage to uphold their mission and the Marianist characteristics? This study also sheds light on how these leaders were able to advance their mission amid a global pandemic. Finally, this research adds to the existing bodies of literature on crisis and Marianist leadership.

Literature Review

This study sought to understand the experiences of lay Marianist leaders during COVID-19. As a result, the literature review focuses on Marianist leadership, crisis leadership, challenges leaders faced during the pandemic, and the lessons they learned.

Marianist Leadership

Over the years, scholars have written about the crucial importance leadership plays in school (Bush & Glover, 2016; Fullan, 2020; Marzano et al., 2005; Moorosi & Bush, 2019). Indeed, as Amakyi (2022) writes, "[l]eadership is seen as the key to success in any institution" (p. 1). One essential aspect of leadership relates to the leaders being responsible for creating, altering, and implementing the mission of their institution. It is this mission that guides and directs school stakeholders on the allocation and direction of resources to attain their mission-driven goals (Moorosi & Bush, 2019; Fullan, 2020). Marianist institutions are mission-centered organizations (Principal Characteristics of Marianist Administration, 2013); the goal of Marianist leaders is to deepen their communion with Jesus Christ and in doing so draw others to faith in the process (Principal Characteristics of Marianist Administration, 2013). In other words, leaders in Marianist institutions are called to be mission driven.

Marianism is a Catholic sub-denomination with an emphasis on community, equity, leadership, and social justice (Habjan, 2007). Marianist education is comprised of five characteristics: educating for formation in faith; providing an integral, quality education; educating in family spirit; educating for service, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; and educating for adaptation

and change (*Characteristics of Marianist education: Twenty-fifth anniversary edition* [hereafter, *Characteristics of Marianist education*], 2020). Although some of the Marianist principles may be present in nonreligious schools, the community emphasis is unique to Marianist contexts (de Klerk & Palmer, 2021; Giardino, 2011; James, 2020). In Marianist institutions, service or ministry is an integral part of the mission (Giardino, 2011; Fogle et al., 2020; James, 2020); Marianist leadership therefore focuses on relationships, community, and community building (Giardino, 2011). Giardino (2011) defines Marianist leadership as "the exercise of influence for the common good of the group or community" (p. 120); for Marianist lay communities, leadership is "the activity of building capacity into the community to face its challenges and problems for the future" (p. 126). Thus, leadership refers to a community's capacity to create its own future. Leadership in the Marianist tradition is about preserving the core principles and teachings while adapting education to external change. During the recent pandemic, Marianist leaders were put to the test. With the mandated switch to online learning, educators had to develop new and effective ways to carry out the Marianist principles while facing numerous challenges.

Crisis Leadership

In times of crisis, leaders "frame the meaning of a crisis event, expressing appropriate concern and support, overseeing mitigation, coordinating support, and facilitating timely, open communication" (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 241). During crises, educational leaders need to ensure that students feel safe and have a clear sense of belonging to promote learning (Boudreau, 2020). Crises in schools most often involve alcohol, drugs, weapons and violence, student discipline issues, off-campus student or staff fatalities, or inclement weather (Mutch, 2015). Often, districts are challenged to be crisis ready, as they lack the personnel, time, and financial resources to provide adequate crisis management training (Smith & Riley, 2012). Smith and Riley (2012) affirm that there are five steps leaders need to follow to respond to a crisis. These steps include (a) obtain reliable facts; (b) implement and adapt to a plan that responds to the crisis (the implementation of such a plan implies that stakeholders know what must be done and who must do it); (c) make decisions quickly; (d) show genuine concern for the welfare of others; and (e) communicate clearly and regularly to limit confusion, stories, and misinformation.

The COVID-19 crisis was not a traditional school crisis. The pandemic was lasting, unprecedented, and complicated (Boin et al., 2020). School leaders across levels, school types, and locations faced various challenges related to equity and inclusion, socioemotional health, and academic outcomes (Harris, 2020). Lay Marianist leaders experienced the same difficulties as their public and charter school counterparts but were also confronted with fulfilling their Marianist mission, which meant preserving, imparting, and sustaining the Marianist characteristics within the remote and hybrid learning environment.

COVID-19 and Educational Challenges

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders were confronted with numerous challenges for which they were unprepared (Miller et al., 2020). These challenges pertained to inequitable student access to technology and Wi-Fi, as well as varying levels of technological knowledge possessed by parents and teachers. Additional difficulties were related to teachers', students', and parents' socioemotional health and serving students with various learning needs.

With the sudden transition to online learning, many families were unprepared for the increased demand for technological access. Inequitable access to devices, Wi-Fi, bandwidth, and technological knowledge is also known by practitioners as "techquity" (D. Young, personal communication, October 21, 2021). Friedman et al. (2020) affirm that inequities in distance education perpetuated and exacerbated already existing disparities among students. A significant number of students were penalized by their limited Wi-Fi access, paired with no or limited access to equipment for digital learning, and thus missed out on classes and content (Harris, 2020; McKenna et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Netolicky, 2020). In some cases, families fortunate enough to have home access to a device had only one device to share between the entire family, including other children and parents working from home (Centeio et al., 2021). School leaders had to be intentional about providing equitable access to learning devices as well as fostering inclusive online learning environments for all students (Thornton, 2021). Leaders played a crucial role in creating and sustaining inviting and inclusive school cultures (Brion, 2021; Long et al., 2022). Equity-focused leaders fostered inclusion by modeling, communicating, translating when needed, and genuinely caring about the well-being of all students. Aspects that helped foster a more inclusive and equitable remote learning environment included flexibility, motivating students, and adjusting methods of classroom participation (Long et al., 2022).

Although Fullan (2013) suggests that technology has the potential to accelerate teaching and learning, most students, teachers, parents, and leaders were not used to integrating technology equipment into their education. Blackman (2021) suggests that students required supplemental assistance when teaching occurred remotely; she found that American boys of low socioeconomic status were at increased risk for academic loss because their parents were essential workers and thus had neither the time nor resources to assist with remote learning. These students were also more likely to drop out altogether, evidencing the disproportionate effects of distance education on students (Harris, 2020).

In addition to the challenges related to access to and the use of technology, leaders were confronted with low levels of socioemotional health among their stakeholders. The socioemotional health of teachers and students was an ongoing challenge for leaders because online learning caused educators and students to feel isolated (Kerrissey & Edmonson, 2020; Koehn, 2020; Thornton, 2021). Students could not participate in their usual academic and extracurricular activities, did not

mingle during breaks or at their lockers, and were unable to be involved in their faith community in the same way they had prior to the pandemic (Friedman et al., 2020).

Many schools attempted to address the problems of online learning through investments in online resources (Giunco et al., 2020). To adapt to the new learning environment, teachers needed to devote additional time to master technology and adjust lesson plans for online teaching, which increased their workload (Kaden, 2020). The switch to online learning caused many teachers to feel overwhelmed by the abrupt need to learn new skills while already working full-time to serve their students (Giunco et al., 2020; Hilger et al., 2021). According to Harper (2020), nearly half of all teachers reported high levels of stress as a daily problem during COVID-19, causing educators to lose their sense of efficacy (Goodwin & Shebby, 2020).

Teachers and students were not the only ones to feel the pressure caused by online learning. The sudden pivot to distance learning was also stressful for parents (Timmons et al., 2021). Timmons et al. (2021) affirm that parents, in part, had to take on the role of teacher themselves in helping their children navigate online platforms. As a result, parents indicated being overwhelmed, as they were having difficulty adjusting to distance learning (Timmons et al., 2021). Additionally, parents felt anxious because they suddenly needed to become more involved in their child's education, ensuring that their work was done or that their child was using Wi-Fi only for learning purposes (Storey & Slavin, 2020). To respond to these increased levels of stress and anxiety, leaders had to intentionally create inviting and inclusive school cultures (Brion, 2021; Long et al., 2022). The lay Marianist leaders in this study included their stakeholders equitably in decision-making processes. As a result of this inclusive practice, the community decided to provide two learning modalities from which families could choose: face-to-face with strict safety guidelines and remote learning.

Lessons Learned from COVID-19

During COVID-19, school leaders faced various challenges, as detailed above. Crisis leaders commonly reflect post crisis by asking questions such as, "How could we have responded better? What can we do to be better prepared?" (Smith & Riley, 2012). In other words, crisis leaders see crises as opportunities for growth, adaptation, and change (Koehn, 2020; Suskewicz & Johnson, 2022). One conspicuous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was the social and emotional isolation for both adults and students (Beauchamp et al., 2021). In this situation, communication became a critical method for maintaining and improving relationships among teachers, students, and parents across school communities (Beauchamp et al., 2021). By showing empathy and effective two-way communication, school leaders found a critical way to support the socioemotional health of their community (Thornton, 2021). With efficient communication, leaders rebuilt trust and confidence among their stakeholders. In turn, that trust fostered a sense of shared identity, which helped the communities adapt to the crisis and increase the institutions' resilience (Jetten et al., 2020, as cited in Beauchamp et al., 2021; Teo et al., 2017). In addition, because of the

complex and uncertain nature of the pandemic, distributed and collaborative leadership proved to be the most effective leadership styles during the COVID-19 crisis (Thornton, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

This study sought to understand the experiences of six lay Marianist educational leaders during COVID-19. As a result, the conceptual framework for this work centered around the five Marianist characteristics: educating for formation in faith; providing an integral, quality education; educating in family spirit; educating for service, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; and educating for adaptation and change (*Characteristics of Marianist Education*, 2020). The first dimension—educating for formation in faith—is based on (a) imitating Mary's example of faith and discipleship. Educators and students in Marianist schools see Mary as a woman of strong faith because she followed God, not knowing where the call she had received would lead her; (b) being a living witness through a personal and committed faith; and (c) fostering dialogue between faith and culture. Marianist educators provide time for reflection through retreats; and (d) form students in gospel values and Christian attitudes by preparing students to build a society of solidarity, justice, and peace.

The second dimension—providing an integral, quality education—is comprised of (a) embracing Mary as a model of integrity, which is witnessed in the nurturing of students and by preparing them for the realities of the world with integrity and competence; (b) developing respect for the dignity of the person as a unique son or daughter of God, where (as each student is unique) students are encouraged to bring forth their talents so that teachers adapt their teaching methods and styles to meet students' needs; (c) providing a high-quality education of the whole person, where teachers not only focus on academics, but also emphasize the social, physical, psychological, and creative development of their students; (d) providing coherent curricula that mission-driven leaders support; (e) instilling a commitment to global and local issues that impact the common good; and (f) fostering respect for diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

The third dimension is educating in family spirit, which outlines the importance of (a) hospitality, graciousness, and community building; (b) a nurturing school culture; (c) interpersonal relationships that are based on respect, integrity, acceptance, and dialogue; (d) collaboration; and (e) a leadership driven by love and focused on service. In the fourth dimension—educating for service, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation—educators adhere to (a) denouncing oppression and working for the common good; (b) promoting a missionary spirit; (c) attending to people who are materially disadvantaged and marginalized; (d) 'walking the talk' and modeling when it comes to being socially just. And finally, educating for adaptation and change (the fourth dimension) means (a) educating to shape the future, which requires using new methods and new technologies; (b) educating people to accept and respect differences in a pluralistic society; (c) developing critical

thinking skills in the search for truth and to inform actions; and (d) being able to adapt to local and global contexts.

This article reports on findings related to educating for adaptation and change, educating in family spirit, and educating for formation in faith because the data support these three dimensions. Even when the researcher prompted participants to speak to the other two characteristics—providing an integral, quality education and educating for service, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation—participants did not elaborate on those characteristics.

Methods

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013) to understand the experiences of lay Marianist school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sought to answer the three research questions detailed in this article's introduction.

Selection of Site and Participants

The site was a Marianist Catholic and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur high school, Grades 9–12, located in the Midwest of the United States. The school served 680 students from more than 60 different regional institutions. Of these students, 89% receive some form of financial assistance and/or scholarships. This high school was in an urban area with a diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic population. At the start of the pandemic, students learned remotely for three months, from March to May 2020. For the 2020–2021 school year, students were given the option to attend school in person, with strict health and safety measures, or remotely. This alternative was offered to accommodate stakeholders who had personal or family health concerns, since vaccines were not fully available for all ages at the time. During the 2020–2021 school year, approximately 600 students chose the in-person option and 60 opted for remote learning. All students returned to the building in January 2021. During the spring of 2021, the researcher met with the principal to discuss the study. After receiving institutional review board approval from her institution, the researcher worked with the principal to contact various leaders within the school.

The researcher used convenience and snowball sampling as the primary methods of recruiting leaders (Neuman, 2011). Criteria for participation included being an administrator, board member, or director in the school, and being available and willing to speak frankly about their experiences during COVID-19. The researcher recruited four participants using convenience sampling and two using snowball sampling. In this sampling process, participants who were recruited via convenience sampling connected the researcher with individuals who they believed might be interested in the study (Neuman, 2011). Of the six total lay Marianist leaders in the sample, individuals held a variety of leadership positions: director of marketing and communications, director of student services, director of ministry and service, principal, chief financial officer (CFO), and the

president of the board (Table 1). Two of the participants were female, and the remaining four were male. The participants worked in their current position of leadership at the school for an average of 11.5 years, with a range of 2 to 30 years.

Table 1

Sample

Leader position *(pseudonym used)*	*Years at high school*
Cindy, Director of Marketing and Communication	14
John, Director of Student Services	2
Mary, Director of Ministry and Service	30
Samuel, Principal	3
James, Chief Financial Officer	3
Mark, President of Board	18
Male	4
Female	2

Data Collection

To gather rich data, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews (Wolcott, 1994). These interviews took place during the spring of 2021 and were held via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The length of these interviews allowed participants to discuss a variety of topics regarding their experience as lay Marianist high school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. In each interview, the researcher explored three constructs: the experiences of the leaders, their challenges, and the lessons they learned pertaining to the implementation of their mission and the Marianist characteristics. These constructs were chosen after a careful review of the existing literature related to crisis leadership, the challenges leaders faced during the pandemic, and the study of the Marianist characteristics. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol that guided her conversations with the leaders (Creswell, 2013). Example interview questions included the following: "How, if at all, did you fulfill your mission and the Marianist characteristics?" and "What lessons did you learn as a result of COVID-19?" Example prompts were "Tell me about your experiences leading in times of crisis," and "Tell me about the challenges you faced in relation to enacting your mission and the Marianist characteristics."

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Each recorded interview was initially transcribed by Zoom. The researcher read the transcripts twice and cleaned the Zoom transcripts to fix errors from the electronic transcriptions. The researcher chose to use an inductive approach to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This choice was made because the researcher did not want to bring preconceived notions of what the

codes should be. Coding took place over two cycles (Saldaña, 2009). In round one, open codes were developed for each key point emerging from the above methods. Examples of codes included stress, lack of accessibility, lack of Wi-Fi, lack of technological know-how, and isolation. In round two, codes were grouped into overlapping categories to create themes relating to the Marianist characteristics of educating for adaptation and change, educating in family spirit, and educating for formation in faith.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the findings, the researcher took several precautions. First, the researcher collected rich data (Wolcott, 1994). Second, the author asked the participants to check the accuracy of the findings, also referred as member checking (Birt et al., 2016). Third, the researcher created a data trail (Rodgers, 2008), in which the researcher copied the participants' quotes from the transcripts and pasted them under each theme that emerged from the data analysis. This process ensured that the researcher was not sharing her viewpoint, but rather the perspectives of the participants. The researcher believes that she employed a rigorous study design along with robust qualitative strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Findings

Study findings are organized by research question. The findings indicate that while these experienced leaders had dealt with various crises beforehand, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed them to new challenges and taught them valuable lessons pertaining to sustaining three of the Marianist characteristics during remote learning. The first question examined how previous crisis experiences prepared these lay Marianist leaders to lead and to advance their Marianist mission during COVID-19.

Crisis Leadership

All leaders in this study had experienced various crises prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mark, president of the school for 18 years, led during the 2008–2009 economic crisis—when he had to creatively find ways to balance the school's budget while securing new sources of funding to continue helping the 60%–70% of student who were on scholarship. He said: "These battles prepared us for COVID-19." Samuel, the school principal, and his team had dealt with several school threats as well as students' and staff members' deaths. He shared:

> This is the beginning of my third year as a principal and all my principalship has been in times of crisis. I never formally led in non-crisis times. These situations are all high stake, high stress, and I felt that I had the whole weight of the school on my shoulders, but these experiences in some ways prepared me for COVID-19 because I knew the basic principles of crisis management and leadership and needed to adapt to change.

When prompted to elaborate on the characteristics of crisis leadership, Samuel replied: "It is stressful, high stake, time-bound, so I focus on communicating facts in a timely manner, getting teams working together, and being transparent." Mark added:

> I make sure that I get the facts and share what we do know with the community because the last thing I want to do is share inaccurate information. I modeled that, and this factual transparency allowed us to make informed decisions based on facts only, not on emotions, because emotions run so high during a crisis. I also spoke to the team about altering and adapting policies when needed. Because if COVID-19 reminded us of something, [it] was that new times call for new methods.

All leaders addressed the need to work collaboratively in times of crisis, to "understand and hear different perspectives." In addition, John noted the importance of "being flexible and being able to pivot at any time." He shared that, in his role, "I had to relocate people, use them differently than what their regular assignments were, and I had to do it without ticking people off." Mary added that, in the Marianist tradition, it was important to remind herself and her team of the Marianist principle that relates to educating for adaptation and change because, in a crisis, change is inevitable. Everyone in the leadership team spoke about that principle regularly and prayed together about decisions and changes they were about to make. All leaders mentioned their faith and the Marianist principles as being an integral part of their crisis leadership. Mark exemplified the sentiment of the group when he stated:

> We do our work in light of our mission statement which reflects the Marianist characteristics. To be faithful to these characteristics, we need to be flexible, work collaboratively and ensure that our decision-making processes reflect the community spirit. To better serve the community and [to] build capacity in the community, we create partnerships, communicate often and well, and provide for those who are in greater need and are most financially or otherwise vulnerable. That means we have to use our resources carefully so that we can help those who need them most.

Although these leaders had experienced several crises prior to COVID-19, the pandemic challenged them to find distinctive solutions to live the Marianist characteristics related to educating for adaptation and change, in family spirit, and for formation in faith. The second and third research questions aimed to understand the challenges the leaders faced related to these three Marianist principles, and how they upheld their mission and the Marianist characteristics.

Challenges and Lessons Learned from Leading During COVID-19

"In one weekend, we had to prepare to serve our students remotely and face-to-face. Like many, we did not expect having to do that so quickly, so stress ran high for all stakeholders." In this quote, Samuel related the significant effort educators put forward to continue educating their students. For both Samuel and Mark, one of the early challenges pertained to keeping up with the amount of information they received, while discerning what to share with the stakeholders.

Educating for Adaptation and Change: Embracing New Methods

As president of the board, Mark was in charge of disseminating information and found it challenging to discern which information was accurate, since he and his team received a plethora of information daily. He summarized the feeling of the leadership team when he said:

> The leadership team quickly realized that the virus was in charge and there was a lot of information shared that was different every minute, it seemed, so we were on a constant pivoting mode, and it was exhausting but also very scary.

Samuel added:

> Although it was helpful to have had experience with crisis leadership and management, I felt overwhelmed all the time. I worked closely with Mark who reminded me to be flexible and communicate often, only sharing facts, such as information from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations. But, as a result of COVID-19, the leadership team had to reinvent things.

For Samuel and John, the overload of information stemmed from offering and implementing two learning platforms: online and face-to-face with strict safety and hygiene protocols in place. Samuel and John focused their work and the majority of their time on supporting teachers and students with their teaching, learning, health, and well-being. For Cindy, the hardship resided in the fact that she and her team were "in crisis communication all the time." She shared that it was difficult to "stay up on all communications whether local, regional, or national while also reading my own articles and such to stay up to date." All parties had to learn and communicate "on the go," and as a result the level of stress and fatigue among leaders and teachers was at an all-time high.

Despite these trial periods and the additional stress and pressures, Cindy shared that they all "stuck together through our values, mission, and our praying together and for each other. We prayed about the situation of course but also for discernment through the massive amount of information we received." James also shared, "It may sound strange but in some ways, it made

our community even tighter to go through COVID as a team and a community." To promote efficiency, these leaders created two smaller leadership teams instead of a larger one so that they could work in small groups on curriculum activities, marketing, and admissions. Small groups also enabled more rapid decision making when needed. John recalled:

> The smaller teams were great because it was easier to meet as needed while also having different perspectives represented. We could then go through the enormous amount of information we received; draft messages for the community based on the new protocols or information received; and propose ideas or changes to the larger leadership team and later to our teachers and community members.

Although these leaders were overwhelmed with the amount of information they had to read, share, and implement, they were able to manage the situation by being flexible and adapting quickly, by praying for each other and for discernment, and by creating smaller leadership teams to increase their efficiency and their ability to respond promptly to unforeseen events. However, these leaders admitted being particularly challenged concerning two aspects of Marianist education: educating in family spirit, and educating for formation in faith.

Educating in Family Spirit

Samuel, the principal, recalled having to change several processes for students opting for face-to-face instruction, in accordance with the Center on Disease Control guidelines. He had to switch the flow of movement in staircases so students would not crowd each other. He also closed all lockers so students could not gather around their lockers during transitions. Students ate outside in tents or in their classrooms, which prevented socializing in the cafeteria. Students also had fewer extracurricular activities, such as sports, clubs, tutoring, retreats, and service activities in the community. These measures made the educators' task of educating in family spirit difficult. Students and teachers alike, in remote and face-to face settings, missed their peers and the community activities they were used to attending before the pandemic. John explained: "For me the challenges pertained to staying in touch whether they chose the online option or being here in person." Specifically, John spoke about the difficulty of engaging teenagers in both learning formats. He found that having a circle time in each classroom, whether virtual or in person, was helpful to bring students into the community and engage them on various topics. He said,

> The circle times were effective because we were able to create the family spirit [that] we all missed. Students looked forward to the circle times because it gave them a sense of community and normalcy, and a voice on issues in school and the current state of affairs.

Leaders also realized that they were not educating in family spirit when they noticed that ELL students were falling behind academically, emotionally, and socially due to the cultural differences and language barriers that they experienced. As a result, and to promote equity and inclusion, the leadership team hired an ELL coordinator to provide additional help to this group of students. John recalled:

> I quickly realized that I had to take it one day at a time and try my best to support all our students and teachers so that we continued to foster the family spirit. My goal was to include everyone as much as I could in all aspects of our education.

As stated earlier, Marianist leadership focuses on relationships, community, and community building for the common good (Giardino, 2011). The lay Marianist leaders in this study worked collaboratively and ensured that the decision-making processes reflected the family and community spirits. To that end, these leaders sent regular surveys to parents, students, and teachers. The purpose of these surveys was to receive feedback on the school's new practices and to keep all stakeholders engaged in the school's life and decisions. Cindy had to learn about Google Docs before utilizing it. She shared, "[U]sing Google Docs was new for me. It helped a great deal to receive the feedback from members of the community and leadership teams without having to meet face-to-face, hence limiting our interactions and chance to spread the virus." In addition to surveying the community, Cindy met virtually with parents, sent regular emails, made calls, and updated the website with news and resources. She stated: "I did my best to keep the family spirit alive and well by engaging with stakeholders and getting their regular input of what we were doing, because this is who we are as a Marianist school community."

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Stated faced heightened racial tensions. In response to the murder of George Perry Floyd Jr., Samuel and the leadership team hired a consultant to create a diversity, equity, and inclusion survey and sent it to students to assess their feelings and needs relating to the school's enactment of the family spirit. Based on the survey results, the leadership team committed to reviewing the student handbook. Changes leaders expected to make pertained to dress code, discipline, attendance, and using culturally appropriate language throughout the document. These changes had not yet occurred at the time of the interviews. Additionally, these leaders decided to hire a director of mission and inclusion to lead their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and foster a greater sense of family spirit for all students.

As principal, Samuel was responsible for the health and safety of the community. To promote the community and family spirit while ensuring the safety of all, he had to find a safe way to "allow visitors and monitor when they came, how many at a time, and keep track of everyone in case we needed to trace them back later." As a result of this challenge, the school purchased a new system

that operated with an iPad and was located at the entrance of the school. The visitor had to provide personal information and the system took a photograph of the visitor, allowing the school to keep a record of who was in the school, when, and for what purpose. The revised visitor policy outlined the steps visitors had to take and instructed staff on how to set up the program.

Additionally, to encourage educating in family spirit, the leadership team created a hotline for resources such as food, Chromebooks, hotspots, and additional resources in the community for families in need. Samuel explained how, seeing a surge in families who were facing eviction, the school also partnered with organizations so that families "could get help, advice, support and a roof above their heads." Moreover, to promote and foster the community spirit and the spirit of hospitality, leaders and teachers delivered pies to each family for Easter. The pie was accompanied by a handwritten note. Teachers and leaders also put signs in students' yards that displayed positive and biblical messages. Finally, the school organized virtual events, such as discussions, jamming sessions, and lectures on various topics.

To honor the unique circumstances of each student and family, leaders realized that they needed to be more flexible with their attendance policies, what counted for service hours, and their grading scales and structure. Additionally, because 70% of the students received tuition assistance and scholarship, James, Mark, and Samuel cut costs where they could to add funds to the tuition assistance program. Mark explained that they "adjusted cost structures to defer non-essential things." As a result, school expenditures were cut because no garbage collection service was needed when the school went fully online for a few weeks. The team also decided to stop printing their letterhead in color and used black and white ink instead. They sent their newsletter electronically and created a recovery grant program to help families who were struggling financially. Mark explained:

> The school's recovery grant program was announced in the summer of 2020, designed to provide short-term relief to families whose income had been impacted by furloughs, layoffs, or business closing. The Board of Trustees approved the resources for the plan, and some of our benefactors contributed to the recovery grant program. In all, more than 120 families received a recovery grant during the 2020–2021 school year. A typical grant lasted for three months and covered 50% of the tuition due during that time period, although we worked to customize the grant to meet the specific need of each family. We continued the program for the 2021–2022 school year, and some families have sought a grant, but fewer than last year.

Moreover, the school created a partnership with a local bank to give families in need loans that they could repay a year later, with flexibility regarding repayment as needed. The leaders also applied for numerous grants and solicited their benefactors, to ensure that students "could get back in the school."

Samuel spoke about additional challenges pertaining to the health and well-being of the adults in the school. He admitted that all the adults in the building were fatigued and burned out, making it more difficult to lead in family spirit. While agreeing that the health, economic, and racial tensions strengthened the community, he noted the importance of fostering the social and emotional health of his staff, teachers, parents, and colleagues. He shared,

> I think it has been hard for all of us to find a balance between work and our personal lives. For me, I model and set boundaries and my time at home with my family is key and so is my time in prayers. I now start the day in prayer.

Other leaders found balance by talking with friends or their office mates, exercising, and spending time in nature.

Despite these challenges, Samuel stated that he and his colleagues were resilient, "thanks to our Marianist values and trusting each other and having confidence in each other, believing and enacting the family spirit." Samuel shared that he learned to let go and to give "space to others to do their job." Mary and John noted the power of the family spirit through teamwork. Mary stated, "The school community was always there—teachers and colleagues in the leadership team were always happy to help, support." Finally, the leaders all indicated the importance of technology in educating in family spirit and finding ways to leverage the use of technology in class, for service and ministry activities, and communication. Leaders explained that post pandemic, they wanted to keep on using Google Docs as a way to communicate with each other and receive feedback: a new practice for these leaders. They also wanted to keep the virtual meeting options for parents, community members, alumni, and benefactors who prefer that modality. Leaders recognized the increasing need to provide professional learning on socioemotional health for students and adults alike. Leaders also intended to keep the current hygiene practices, as well as the new system for visitors. Finally, teachers and leaders saw value in the morning circles to engage students on various topics and foster the family spirit.

Educating for Formation in Faith

The COVID-19 pandemic also gave these leaders an opportunity to rethink how to educate for formation in faith. Mary explained that her team had to re-imagine what educating for formation in faith looked like virtually. She spoke about her challenges to plan masses, the eighth grade graduation, spiritual retreats, and the service activities that students typically do in the community. Mary said,

> It was so hard to find ways to continue forming our students in faith at first because we had some students online and some in person but also because we were used to doing everything in person. I felt lost and quite inadequate in my role for a while.

To help herself, Mary "sought the advice and support of colleagues in similar positions across other religious institutions." She asserted that these networks helped her and gave her the confidence to adapt and respond to the need to change how the school educated for formation in faith. Mary organized virtual masses and masses and prayer services that took place in the outdoor stadium. Mary recalled:

> We had a wonderful turnout for our Rosary prayer in the stadium. I was surprised and received very positive feedback from the community. It was so successful that I think we may do it that way again in the future rather than in our church or maybe we can do both.

Prayers were also conducted by students and teachers or leaders using the school's public address (PA) system. Retreats were either conducted virtually or were one day long instead of the traditional two-day gathering. Mary always sought feedback from students, teachers, parents, and leaders after each activity to evaluate the offerings. For the service activities students needed to perform, she organized for students to serve the community without being in person. Students were asked to make gifts for older adults, including placemats and bookmarks. Mary also structured activities in which students connected virtually with people with disabilities, to encourage them through their heightened isolation due to the pandemic. Additionally, students created videos for younger children in the community through a partnership Mary leveraged. In other words, students were able to perform acts of service virtually and be educated for formation in faith, thanks to Mary's flexible, adaptive, and creative leadership. Mary explained that, post pandemic, she will continue to send surveys regularly and might consider keeping certain practices that they offered during the pandemic, such as prayers on the PA system, offering virtual options for retreats, and recording the prayer services to make them available to the entire school community by adding them to the school's website.

As shown above, the six school leaders in this study faced numerous challenges to educate for adaptation and change, in family spirit, and for formation in faith during the pandemic. Nevertheless, they were able to stay true to their mission and sustain these Marianist characteristics.

Limitations

This study was limited to the experiences of six Marianist high school leaders within in an urban district in the Midwestern United States. Although the findings are not generalizable to other leaders and contexts, the author believes that this study provides a road map for other studies to be conducted across Marianist and faith-based schools and levels.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Findings indicate that the six lay Marianist leaders in this study were confronted with challenges concerning the access to and use of technology, which other public and charter school leaders also experienced. These findings concur with Story and Slavin (2020) and Blackman (2021), who affirm that lack of access to devices such as tablets and Wi-Fi was the principal barrier during the pandemic for students who were economically marginalized. Despite the technological challenges online learning presented, the Marianist leaders realized that technology had an important role to play in education and decided to keep certain components of online learning moving forward. This finding is in agreement with Fullan (2013), who claims that technology has the potential to accelerate teaching and learning and prepare students for a global world.

Additional difficulties pertaining to the socioemotional health of teachers, students, and parents were also experienced by school leaders across school types, as online learning caused educators and students to feel isolated and added pressure to the parents' lives. This finding is supported by studies conducted in various public schools within the United States and New Zealand, which suggest that online learning during the pandemic had negative consequences on the emotional well-being of numerous students and parents (Koehn, 2020; Kerrissey & Edmonson, 2020; Thornton, 2021).

The leaders in this study had experienced several crises prior to the pandemic. As a result, they were knowledgeable on crisis leadership and were able to follow the steps outlined by Smith and Riley (2012). They obtained reliable facts, implemented relevant contingency plans, and made decisions quickly. They showed genuine concern for the welfare of others, and they communicated clearly and regularly to limit confusion, stories, and misinformation. However, these leaders faced additional and unique challenges pertaining to the Marianist characteristics of educating for adaptation and change, in family spirit, and for formation in faith. As noted earlier, leaders are responsible for creating, altering, and implementing the mission of their organization. In this study, the six leaders were mission-centered, as they adapted their practices to maintain the Marianist characteristics by adopting a community approach to education, being innovative, creating small leadership teams, and continuously praying for each other and for discernment.

Specifically, to educate for adaptation and change and in family spirit, the leaders initiated a morning circle time with students and teachers so that everyone could benefit from a safe space in which to share their feelings and be heard. The leaders also created a hotline for resources such as food, Chromebooks, hotspots, and other available resources in the community. They altered their expenses to allocate more funds to support students who needed financial help. In addition, the leaders partnered with community organizations to provide low-interest loans that families could pay back a year later; they also partnered with community organizations to offer housing-

related resources. Finally, they altered some of their policies related to attendance, grading, and community service. To promote and foster family spirit, leaders and teachers found various ways to maintain a sense of community. The school also organized virtual events such as discussions, jamming sessions, and lectures on various topics. To continue educating for formation in faith, teachers and leaders put signs in students' yards that displayed positive and biblical messages. They also used virtual platforms to hold masses and prayer services and modified the service requirements for their students.

As educators continue to contend with COVID-19, this study adds to the Marianist and crisis leadership bodies of literature. It also provides a road map to Catholic school leaders, as it offers school leaders ideas and suggestions on how to uphold their organizational values and mission during a pandemic. Although this study took place in a Marianist school and within the COVID-19 crisis, the researcher believes that the findings are relevant to educational leaders in various faith-based institutions and are applicable to other types of crises, as well. A community approach to education, for example, should be the norm, not the exception: Creating partnerships within the school and the larger community and involving families in the school's and students' lives should be any leaders' priorities. Additionally, being creative, adaptive, and resilient are necessary dispositions, because crises are unpredictable and inevitable, and staying true to the school mission in times of crises is challenging.

Using various methodological approaches, larger samples, and various data collection instruments, additional studies could investigate how other school leaders and educators who work in faith-based schools across levels, communities, states, and countries served their students and upheld their religious values and mission during the pandemic.

To conclude, this study examined the experiences of lay Marianist leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicate that, during the pandemic, leaders were faced with challenges pertaining to receiving an excess of information, facing equity in accessing and using technology, serving students with various learning needs, and attending to the socioemotional health of students, teachers, and parents. Despite these difficulties, the leaders were committed to sustaining their mission and enacting the Marianist characteristics of educating for change and adaptation, in family spirit, and for formation in faith. This study is significant because it provides unique perspectives on how leaders of a Marianist urban high school were able to advance their mission during a global health pandemic. This study also adds to the crisis and Marianist leadership bodies of literature.

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