

The Relevance of Youth Identity Formation in an Increasingly Individualistic Society

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Abstract:

In recent months, the health crisis has brought about suspicion of others. Not only does it create major problems for social coexistence, but also for human flourishing. The growth of individualism makes it difficult for people to recognise their relational dimension. This phenomenon especially affects young people, since during their youth they must face the challenge of building their identity. With the aim of offering educational keys to help young people face this challenge in the current context, an exploratory content analysis of different texts of Popes John Paul II and Francis has been carried out. For this purpose, through an initial statistical analysis of the texts and then a thematic analysis based on grounded theory, four major educational keys have been found in the thought of both Popes.

Keywords: youth; community development; education; social justice; humanities education; individualism

Connected. Therefore, Disconnected

Connected, yet disconnected seems to be the technological world's greatest paradox. Today, due to the great technological advances, our most varied appetences can be immediately fulfilled with just a Hey Siri or an Ok Google. This screens' omnipresence has had a great impact on many daily aspects, including those related to the subjectivation processes. Nowadays, technological devices allow us to continuously listen and watch ourselves changing the way in which both people regard themselves¹ and interact with others. Contrary to what it may seem, under this superficial sense of connexion, many voices² claim that current technology enhances a tremendous detachment from our own self, from others, and from the world.

This detachment hides a greater danger, as it hinders people from discovering some important aspects about their own human essence. People are, by nature, called to encounter³ and as *homo*

1 Ángel García del Dujo et al., 'Pensar La (Teoría de La) Educación, Desde La Tecnología de Nuestro Tiempo', *Teoría de La Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* 33, no. 2 (2nd April 2021): 15, <https://doi.org/10.14201/teri.25432>.

2 Jeff Orlowski, *The Social Dilemma* (Estados Unidos de América: Netflix, 2020), <https://www.netflix.com/title/81254224>.

3 Cf. Alfonso López-Quintás, *Descubrir La Grandeza de La Vida: Una Vía de Ascenso a La Madurez Personal*, 1st ed. (Madrid: Desclee de Brower, 2009).

viators it is only through making their way with others⁴ how human beings grow, mature, and reach fullness. Therefore, this fake sense of connection strongly endangers the relational dimension⁵ of human nature, as well as the human ability to contemplate – a very important aspect for human flourishing. Today's world promotes multitasking as a beneficial type of attention for daily life. However, the truth is that multitasking seriously jeopardises people's ability to fully attend to reality. Full attention is needed to accomplish one of the main human activities: contemplation.⁶ It is only through contemplation that people begin to ask themselves questions and to philosophise. Therefore, our technological era, despite its many advantages, poses a serious challenge for human flourishing: the challenge of recognising the dialogicality of human nature. In today's world, people are pressured to recognise themselves as individualistic beings to the detriment of its relational human essence.

Recognising the nature of these pressures will especially help educators to understand the deep challenges that new generations are now facing to grow and mature. This knowledge will allow them to welcome young people without judging or labelling them, knowing how to read their deepest desires in their behaviours, thus generating a great educational opportunity. These pressures are not presented below as an empty criticism, but as a framework for understanding the new generations and, above all, for realising the urgency of tackling them.

The Growth of Individualism: a Challenge for Identity Construction

These difficulties put in great jeopardy the achievement of one of the greatest of youth's vital challenges: the construction of identity.⁷ Although the construction of identity is a constant throughout life, during the stage between the end of adolescence and the beginning of adult life the question about oneself becomes crucial. Today this question is answered in an increasingly individualistic environment. What are the pressures that are leading to this growth of individualism? A multiplicity of phenomena could be cited to complete this causal explanation, but the three most important elements in this regard are the hyper-saturation of the senses, the crisis of truth, and the disappearance of rituals.

In the first place, the deep imbrication of the online environment in the physical world through mobile phones, computers, televisions, and many other devices, which plague our world, have led to the appearance of the saturated self.⁸ The self is so full of sounds, images, voices, photographs, and videos that it has become blind and deaf to his own interiority and to the others that surround it. This deafness and blindness are caused by a continuously divided attention that makes it impossible to acquire the necessary inner silence⁹ that is required to listen to one's own self and to others, limiting ourselves to seeing without looking.¹⁰ This loss of gaze, which supposes

4 Cf. María Lacalle, *En Busca de La Unidad Del Saber*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Fundación Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, 2018).

5 María G Amilburu, Aurora Bernal, and María Rosario González Martín, *Antropología de La Educación. La Especie Educable* (Madrid: Síntesis, 2018), 79.

6 Cf. Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford Briefs, 2015).

7 Seth J. Schwartz, Alan Meca, and Mariya Petrova, 'Who Am I and Why Does It Matter? Linking Personal Identity and Self-Concept Clarity', in *Self-Concept Clarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 145–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71547-6_8; Seth J. Schwartz et al., 'Identity in Young Adulthood: Links with Mental Health and Risky Behavior', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 36 (January 2015): 39–52, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2014.10.001>; Katja Crone, 'Personal Identity, Transformative Experiences, and the Future Self', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 2 (18 April 2021): 299–310, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09699-7>; Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (Norton & Company, 1994); Romano Guardini, *Las Etapas de La Vida* (Madrid: Palabra, 2015).

8 Cf. John Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

9 Cf. Francesc Torralba, *El Silencio: Un Reto Educativo* (Madrid: PPC, 2005).

10 Sonia M. Gonzalez-Iglesias and Carmen De la Calle Maldonado, 'El Acompañamiento Educativo, Una Mirada Ampliada Desde La Antropología Personalista', *Scientia et Fides* 8, no. 1 (11th February 2020): 196, <https://doi.org/10.12775/SetF.2020.012>.

a reduction of our sense of sight, has also reached listening. However, the changes occurred to sight and listening are nothing compared to the great transformation that the sense of touch has undergone. Tactile vision¹¹ has now become the way in which we access reality, causing the loss of distance and encouraging people to remain in the outside aspects of experience instead of going deeply into it. This tactile vision has also led to an increasing sensation of detachment from one's physical materiality.¹² This loss of materiality can be seen, for instance, in the growing rates related to addictions without substance.

Secondly, new technologies have led our society to become the knowledge society.¹³ Despite the growing number of university graduates in our world, two paradoxical phenomena coexist in this academicist world: the crisis of truth and misinformation. In the first place, the dominant scientific-technical mentality in Higher Education institutions not only leads to a reductionism of reality in material and biological terms,¹⁴ but to a profound change in the way which we approach reality. Reality has gone from being a mystery in which we enter to becoming a problem to solve.¹⁵ This reductionism is reflected in the loss of prestige of the Humanities subjects at the University level worldwide.¹⁶ Because of both the depreciation of the Humanities and the increasing idealisation of savage scientism, truth is facing a deep crisis.¹⁷ This crisis of truth becomes even more pressing at a time when new technologies offer the possibility of accessing huge amounts of information, of which the reliability should not be taken for granted.

The third factor that has eroded the community dimension of human nature is related to the discrediting of cultural transmission. The gradual disappearance of rituals¹⁸ in a homogeneous global society generates a feeling of rootlessness. Rituals allow people to comprehensively inhabit reality.¹⁹ The coronavirus and confinement have strongly impacted one of the most important rituals for people: the farewell rites. During recent months, due to the different restrictions that each country has adopted, many people have not been able to say goodbye to their loved ones with their cultural rites of passage.

These three phenomena highlight the difficulty that people have today to recognise their dialogic dimension²⁰ and, therefore, to acknowledge the importance of preserving the community as it plays an important role in people's flourishing and happiness.

Connecting with One's Own Identity: a Great Challenge for Youth in Times of a Pandemic

The phenomena previously outlined, and amplified by Covid, create difficulties for young people to discover their five major dimensions (relational dimension, biographical dimension, inner dimension, corporeal dimension, and spiritual dimension). Different studies carried out in the past

11 Cf. Heidi Rae Cooley, 'It's All about the Fit: The Hand, the Mobile Screenic Device and Tactile Vision', *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 2 (29th August 2004): 133–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412904044797>.

12 Cf. Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty* (Polity Press, 2017).

13 Cf. David John Frank and John W. Meyer, *The University and the Global Knowledge Society* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2020).

14 Cf. Joaquín Navarro-Valls, *Discurso de Joaquín Navarro Valls* (Cardenal Herrera CEU University, 2005), <https://www.uchceu.es/docs/conocenos/honoris-causa/discursos-joaquin-navarro.pdf>.

15 Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *Diario Metafísico (1928-1933)* (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1969).

16 Cf. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010); Nuccio Ordine, *La Utilidad de Lo Inútil: Manifiesto* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2013).

17 Cf. Alejandro Llano, *Teoría Del Conocimiento* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2015).

18 Cf. Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present* (Polity Press, 2020).

19 Cf. Higinio Marín, 'Muerte, Memoria y Olvido', *Thémata: Revista de Filosofía*, no. 37 (2006): 309–19, <http://hdl.handle.net/11441/27844>.

20 Cf. Ricardo Yepes and Javier Aranguren, *Fundamentos de Antropología. Un Ideal de La Excelencia Humana*, 6th ed. (Pamplona: EUNSA. Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 2003).

few months have shown the harsh times that new generations are living in to deal with the effects of the pandemic.

Firstly, different studies have verified a growing rate of disorders related to mental health among the young (depression, anxiety, self-injurious injuries, or even suicide)²¹ that show the difficulties that new generations are having to cope with from the suffering originated by Covid-19. These mental problems are adding more concern to an already alarming situation regarding mental health among the young. In the past decades, youth mental health has deteriorated due to problems originated by the digital world and, especially, by social networks.²² All these mental health problems make it more difficult for young people to achieve the identity challenge. Secondly, during confinement the consumption of different elements related to non-substance addictions, such as online gambling,²³ pornography,²⁴ or different social networks has rocketed.²⁵ The consumption of these elements may tremendously alter the capacity of young people to exercise their freedom in a time where the choices they make are decisive. In the self-determination process that takes place during youth, autonomy and responsibility play a very important role.²⁶ The behaviours mentioned above jeopardise young people's capacity to act autonomously and responsibly due to freedom's vices. Thirdly, Covid has also affected people's narrative competence, an essential element for identity construction.²⁷ Many students have missed the opportunity to perform important rites of passage for their adjustment to academic, university, and work life. Rites such as university graduation that allow people to better narrate who they are, and at what stage of their life they are at, have not been possible. Consequently, the feeling of uprooting has increased.

Therefore, there is no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has brought new difficulties to the personal identity construction task, and education should not remain indifferent to this fact. Although in recent months there have been many investigations regarding the best educational methodologies for online teaching or for hybrid education, investigation regarding ways of enhancing other educational concerns, such as personal identity, have not raised the same interest. It is worth noting that the pandemic has also highlighted how, in a world that brands the new generations as egomaniacs and screen addicts, when young people find meaning, they become a reference for the rest of society in terms of social commitment or creativity to meet the needs

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- 21 Berta Rodrigues Maia and Paulo César Dias, 'Ansiedade, Depressão e Estresse Em Estudantes Universitários: O Impacto Da COVID-19', *Estudos de Psicologia (Campinas)* 37 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0275202037e200067>; Mikaella E. Patsali et al., 'University Students' Changes in Mental Health Status and Determinants of Behavior during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Greece', *Psychiatry Research* 292 (October 2020): 113298, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113298>.
 - 22 Dmitri Rozgonjuk et al., 'Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and Social Media's Impact on Daily-Life and Productivity at Work: Do WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat Use Disorders Mediate That Association?', *Addictive Behaviors* 110 (November 2020): 106487, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2020.106487>; Giuseppe Logrieco et al., 'The Paradox of Tik Tok Anti-Pro-Anorexia Videos: How Social Media Can Promote Non-Suicidal Self-Injury and Anorexia', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 3 (25 January 2021): 1041, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031041>; R. C. Brown et al., '#cutting: Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) on Instagram', *Psychological Medicine* 48, no. 2 (14 January 2018): 337–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291717001751>; Anna Vannucci et al., 'Social Media Use and Risky Behaviors in Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis', *Journal of Adolescence* 79, no. March 2019 (February 2020): 258–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.01.014>.
 - 23 Daniel L. King et al., 'Problematic Online Gaming and the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 9, no. 2 (June 2020): 184–86, <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2020.00016>.
 - 24 Gemma Mestre-Bach, Gretchen R. Blycker, and Marc N. Potenza, 'Pornography Use in the Setting of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 9, no. 2 (June 2020): 181–83, <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2020.00015>.
 - 25 Guyonne Rogier, Sara Beomonte Zobel, and Patrizia Velotti, 'COVID-19, Loneliness and Technological Addiction: Longitudinal Data', *Journal of Gambling Issues*, no. 47 (8th March 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4309/jgi.2021.47.4>.
 - 26 Marta Ruiz Corbella et al., 'Ser Uno Mismo. Repensando La Autonomía y La Responsabilidad Como Coordinadas de La Educación Actual', *Teoría de La Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* 24, no. 2 (30th July 2013): 59–81, <https://doi.org/10.14201/10355>.
 - 27 Antonio Bernal Guerrero, 'Postmodernización y Educación. Notas Para El Debate de Una Narrativa Pedagógica Centrada En La Identidad', *Educación XXI* 14, no. 2 (1st June 2011): 285–302, <https://doi.org/10.5944/educxx1.14.2.255>.

of their fellow human beings.²⁸

In this regard, the Catholic Church has always acknowledged the power of youth. In fact, Pope John Paul II pointed out that youth was a hope for all humanity.

Your youth is not just your own property, your personal property or the property of a generation: it belongs to the whole of that space that every man traverses in his life's journey, and at the same time it is a special possession belonging to everyone. It is a possession of humanity itself.²⁹

Similarly, Pope Francis exhorted young people not to think of themselves only as the future of society, but as the present of it. Moreover, he has insisted on the importance of love during youth, as love has the power of shaping who one will be.

Whatever you fall in love with, it will win over not only your imagination, it will affect everything. It will be what makes you get up in the morning, what keeps you going at times of fatigue, what will break open your hearts and fill you with wonder, joy and gratitude. Realize that you have a mission and fall in love; that will decide everything (cf. PEDRO ARRUIPE, S.J., *Nada es más práctico*).³⁰

Due to the great importance that the Catholic church, and especially its recent Popes, have given to youth, the objective of this article is to analyse two recent documents of the Catholic Church dedicated to young people (the letter *Dilecti Amici* and the apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*) in order to discover pedagogical keys that can guide educational interventions in order to help people discover their dialogic nature and build an identity that will be able to overcome the growing individualism we are witnessing.

Method

Following previous research in the field,³¹ a documental analysis based on an exploratory discourse analysis³² has been carried out. To accomplish this analysis, a double methodology has been used. In the first place, a statistical analysis of the corpus was carried out by using the *Sketchengine* software. Through this software, comparisons have been made between the most frequently used verbs and nouns in each of the documents analysed. After that, a thematic content analysis³³ has been conducted by following the postulates of the grounded theory.³⁴ In this way, different

28 Instituto de la Juventud, 'Jóvenes Contra El Virus', *Injuve*, 2020, <http://www.injuve.es/conocenos/noticia/jovenes-contra-el-virus>.

29 Pope John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici* of Pope John Paul II to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of International Youth Year' (Vatican City, 1985), 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1985/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_31031985_dilecti-amici.html.

30 Pope Francis, 'Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Panama on the Occasion of the 34th World Youth Day Holy Mass for World Youth Day Homily of His Holiness' (Panamá, 2019), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190127_omelia-gmg-panama.html.

31 Cf. Jorge Baeza Correa, 'La Idea de Universidad En El Papa Francisco', *Veritas* 48, no. 48 (April 2021): 225–49, <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-92732021000100225>.

32 Cf. María Arbeláez and José Onrubia, 'Análisis Bibliométrico y de Contenido. Dos Metodologías Complementarias Para El Análisis de La Revista Colombiana Educación y Cultura', *Revista de Investigaciones UCM* 14, no. 23 (2014): 14–31, <http://www.revistas.ucm.edu.co/ojs/index.php/revista/article/view/5>.

33 Cf. Claudio Díaz Herrera, 'Investigación Cualitativa y Análisis de Contenido Temático. Orientación Intelectual de Revista Universum', *Revista General de Información y Documentación* 28, no. 1 (13th July 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5209/RGID.60813>.

34 Cf. Antonio Trinidad, Virginia Carrero, and Rosa María Soriano, *Teoría Fundamentada 'Grounded Theory' La Construcción de La Teoría a Través Del Análisis Interpretativa* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2006).

codification categories arose as different successive analysis of the documents were done.

Sample

To choose the documents to study, a search was carried out through the pages of the Holy See. We searched among the apostolic letters, encyclicals, and exhortations written by the last three Popes of the Church to find the ones which were specifically directed to youth. This search returned two documents: the apostolic letter *Dilecti Amici* of his Holiness John Paul II written in 1985 and the apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit* written by Pope Francis in 2019.

Procedure

To carry out the different analysis, both documents were downloaded in a pdf version in English from the official website of the Holy See. Both texts were entered in the *Sketchengine* text analysis tool, creating a new corpus with two subcorpus, corresponding to each of the texts. After preparing this corpus, a statistical analysis was carried out by using the wordlist function to analyse the most frequent verbs and nouns in each of the documents. Once this phase of statistical analysis was concluded, an exploratory discourse analysis was carried out through thematic content analysis. To accomplish this analysis, texts were read several times obtaining different coding categories related to educational keys for the construction of identity. The categories obtained were the following:

- Search for meaning
- Way of looking at youth
- Community and fraternity
- Self-acceptance
- Service
- Accompaniment
- Culture and roots
- Intergenerational relationships

Based on this classification, an interpretive analysis of the coded resulted in four educational strategies for the construction of identity.

Results

Statistic analysis

To compare the most frequent nouns and adjectives in each corpus, comparisons were made by using the frequency ranking instead of the number of times that a word appeared in the corpus since the texts have a very different extension (*Dilecti Amici* has 16424 words versus 33673 for *Christus Vivit*) and comparison using those times would have led to mistaken conclusions. Table 1 offers a comparison between the most frequent 40 words and nouns in each of the texts.

Table 1

NOUN	Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	JPII	life	man	christ	youth	people	god	time	question	world	word
	Francis	people	life	[number]	god	youth	jesus	love	way	time	world
	Rank	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
	JPII	way	love	gospel	church	truth	plan	vocation	conscience	family	person
	Francis	church	other	lord	heart	christ	person	word	experience	spirit	dream
	Rank	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
	JPII	value	humanity	[number]	commandment	conversation	work	sense	heart	jesus	treasure
	Francis	saint	vocation	joy	family	thing	man	faith	synod	father	day
	Rank	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
	JPII	father	year	growth	hope	generation	path	society	witness	jn	dimension
	Francis	work	friend	ministry	gift	community	everything	today	place	adult	strength
VERB	Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	JPII	be	have	do	make	say	become	ask	write	know	come
	Francis	be	have	do	make	give	see	take	need	live	let
	Rank	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
	JPII	call	give	go	live	see	find	speak	love	begin	follow
	Francis	become	grow	find	want	ask	say	help	love	know	go
	Rank	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
	JPII	mean	bear	link	put	contain	look	wish	show	pray	take
	Francis	feel	experience	call	keep	come	offer	seek	bring	listen	look
	Rank	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
	JPII	seem	address	experience	think	develop	leave	create	acquire	bring	enable
	Francis	speak	mean	show	learn	think	tell	lose	share	follow	lead

In the first place, it is observed that in *Dilecti Amici* seeking for meaning from an intellectual approach is more highlighted than in Francis' text. In fact, in *Dilecti Amici* words such as 'question' or 'truth' appear in the first positions (8 and 15 respectively), whereas in Francis' text these words are not even among the most common ones. The primacy of this intellectual search for meaning is also reflected in the greater importance that nouns and verbs such as 'word', 'say', 'ask', and 'mean' acquire in the texts of John Paul II compared to Francis. On the contrary, Francis' most frequent words are an invitation to action, to serve. Thus, in Francis words such as 'other', 'gift', 'need', 'help', or 'listen' are more frequent than in John Paul II. Similarly, in Francis words related to fraternity such as 'love', 'heart', or 'give' are ranked higher than they are in John Paul. However, the comparison between the two texts shows many common places. Both texts emphasise the importance of meaning, service, community, and love as important elements for making the most of one's youth.

Interpretive analysis: educational keys in the light of the thought of John Paul II and Francis

The exploratory analysis carried out through a thematic analysis has yielded four great education-

al keys for the construction of identity to face the challenges posed by a growing individualistic society.

1. Promote the search for meaning

Both Pontiffs have highlighted the importance of seeking answers to the big questions during one's youth. In this regard, both Popes point out the cruciality of searching for meaning.

What must I do so that my life may have full value and full meaning? The youth of each one of you, dear friends, is a treasure that is manifested precisely in these questions. Man asks himself these questions throughout his life. But in the time of youth they are particularly urgent, indeed insistent [...] It is a question here of a reply that concerns the whole of life, that embraces the whole of human existence.³⁵

In Pope Francis' text this search of meaning is often presented along with the importance of having great ideals, horizons, and goals.

Dear young people, make the most of these years of your youth. Don't observe life from a balcony. Don't confuse happiness with an armchair, or live your life behind a screen. Whatever you do, do not become the sorry sight of an abandoned vehicle! Don't be parked cars, but dream freely and make good decisions. Take risks, even if it means making mistakes. Don't go through life anaesthetized or approach the world like tourists.³⁶

Therefore, the combination of both thoughts offers a first great educational key: not only should a strong search for meaning be promoted during youth, but also young people should be encouraged to transform their thoughts in actions. Therefore, educational youth accompaniment should focus on helping new generations to leave mere passivity and transform the meaning they have sought in decisions and concrete actions.

2. The role of the community as an ethos of educational action

At a time when social ties and trust in others have strongly deteriorated, it is urgent to recover the community dimension of educational action.³⁷ As Francis points out, this becomes even more essential given the many difficulties that the family institution is facing. Family is the first place where the relational dimension of the self is discovered. As John Paul II points out, community helps people discover that they exist and are with others and for others.³⁸ In this regard, Pope Francis provides a tremendously illuminating key: the community as a renewal for hope.

We need to make all our institutions better equipped to be more welcoming to young people, since so many have a real sense of being orphaned [...] To all these orphans – including perhaps

35 Pope John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter Dilecti Amici'.

36 Pope Francis, 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit of the Holy Father Francis to Young People and to the Entire People of God' (Vatican City, 2019), 143, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

37 Cf. Amilburu, Bernal, and González Martín, *Antropología de La Educación. La Especie Educable*, 120.

38 Pope John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter Dilecti Amici'.

ourselves – communities like a parish or school should offer possibilities for experiencing openness and love, affirmation and growth. Many young people today feel that they have inherited the failed dreams of their parents and grandparents, dreams betrayed by injustice, social violence, selfishness and lack of concern for others. In a word, they feel uprooted.³⁹

In an environment full of disappointment and uncertainty, the community can be a great source of hope. Helping young people to look hopefully at the coming stages requires being able to exercise a merciful gaze with oneself, with one's own story and with others. Educating in forgiveness from childhood⁴⁰ must, without doubt, be a constant educational element in school environments.

3. Social justice

Both Pontiffs have endorsed the formative power of caring about others. Previous research is consistent with these thoughts⁴¹ showing the positive impact that volunteering has on youth development. As both Popes remark, youth is not a time for self-caring, but for acknowledging the needs of others. Young people, as Francis has stated in many discourses, is not a just a mere preparation for the future, but it is also the time to intervene with the strength and idealism that characterises youth. In this regard, both Popes insist that discovering one's identity cannot be done in solitude and getting in touch with the mystery of suffering by helping others can strongly enlighten this discovery.⁴²

By helping others during their youth, people are more likely to commit themselves to social justice and to the common good. Experiencing the importance of serving the common good while being young will condition many of the decisions that young people will make in the following years, especially those related to the world of work.

4. Getting to know one's own culture

Both Popes have stressed the importance of knowing one's own culture to generate an authentic encounter with oneself and with others. As we pointed out at the beginning of the article, one of the today's greatest dramas is uprooting. The Pontiffs point out the importance of being rooted in the present through the knowledge of one's own historical and cultural tradition. As they point out, knowing the past allows us to learn from it, to understand the wounds that separate us, and to heal them.⁴³ This process of knowing and assimilating one's own culture is fundamental in the current era because as Esteve points out, an educated citizen is the one who can understand all the difficulties that previous generations have had to overcome to achieve democracy and to live in a peaceful coexistence through bonds of trust and unity.⁴⁴

As John Paul II points out, the encounter with the cultural heritage is an authentic call to ethical commitment. We are immersed in a climate of uncertainty and suspicion, where radicalisation,

39 Pope Francis, 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*', 216.

40 Isabel Dans-Álvarez-de-Sotomayor and Eva-María Muñoz-Álvarez, 'El Perdón Como Forma de Aprendizaje', *Estudios Sobre Educación* 40 (25th January 2021): 9–25, <https://doi.org/10.15581/004.40.9-25>.

41 Hyejin Bang, Doyeon Won, and Sanghyun Park, 'School Engagement, Self-Esteem, and Depression of Adolescents: The Role of Sport Participation and Volunteering Activity and Gender Differences', *Children and Youth Services Review* 113 (June 2020): 105012, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105012>; Steven M. Worker et al., 'Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Teenagers-as-Teachers Programs', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 34, no. 1 (22nd January 2019): 30–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558418764089>.

42 Francis, 'Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Panama', 170.

43 Pope Francis, 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*', 199.

44 José Manuel Esteve, *Educación: Un Compromiso Con La Memoria*, 2nd ed. (Barcelona: Octaedro, 2010), 183.

extremism, and youth violence are reaching unprecedented heights. Understanding one's own tradition allows two virtues to grow: gratitude and responsibility. In the first place, recognising that you are where you are thanks to the immense work carried out by many previous generations gives birth to the responsibility of responding to such a great gift. Second, realising that a great legacy has been inherited also brings out gratitude, and gratitude is the prelude to a meaningful presence in the world, since thanking is action.⁴⁵

In regard to this inheritance we cannot maintain a passive attitude, still less a defeatist one, as did the last of the servants described in the parable of the talents.⁽⁶⁹⁾ We must do everything we can to accept this spiritual inheritance, to confirm it, maintain it and increase it. This is an important task for all societies, especially perhaps for those that find themselves at the beginning of their independent existence, or for those that must defend from the danger of destruction from outside or of decay from within the very existence and essential identity of the particular nation.⁴⁶

Discussion

The educational insights found in the texts analysed correspond with the results of recent research. First, regarding meaning, different investigations⁴⁷ have shown that it acts as a protective factor against the suffering caused by the pandemic, highlighting the truth of Frankl's postulates⁴⁸ about inner freedom. Different studies have also highlighted the role that meaning plays as an enhancement of positive youth development.⁴⁹ For this reason, educational experiences to awaken in young people the desire to seek for meaning should be strongly encouraged. However, as Pope Francis pointed out, not only does education need to promote this search for meaning, but it also needs to help students translate the meaning they have found into concrete decisions and actions. In order to enhance this seeking of meaning and its transformation into action, the methodology 'awake-discover-decide'⁵⁰ can strongly help design educational experiences that allow young people to listen to themselves, to others, and to reality, and to seriously question who they are. Secondly, as to community, different studies have demonstrated the mediating role that the establishment of young-adult relationships has for positive youth development.⁵¹ It should be noted that Pope Francis strongly underlines the importance of intergenerational relationships especially with the elderly.⁵² In this way, the Pope offers a view full of possibility on the elderly, far from a view based on the fragility and vulnerability with which elder people have been represented

45 Gustavo Villapalos and Enrique San Miguel, *Los Valores de Los Grandes Hombres* (Barcelona: Planeta+Testimonio, 2001), 245.

46 Pope John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter Dilecti Amici', 11.

47 Bob Lew et al., 'Meaning in Life as a Protective Factor against Suicidal Tendencies in Chinese University Students', *BMC Psychiatry* 20, no. 1 (18th December 2020): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02485-4>; Hande Korkmaz and Berna Güloğlu, 'The Role of Uncertainty Tolerance and Meaning in Life on Depression and Anxiety throughout Covid-19 Pandemic', *Personality and Individual Differences* 179 (September 2021): 110952, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110952>.

48 Cf. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust* (Random House International, 2008).

49 William Damon, Jenni Menon, and Kendall Cotton Bronk, 'The Development of Purpose During Adolescence', *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (1st July 2003): 119–28, https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_2; Anthony L. Burrow and Patrick L. Hill, 'Purpose as a Form of Identity Capital for Positive Youth Adjustment', *Developmental Psychology* 47, no. 4 (July 2011): 1196–1206, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023818>.

50 Gonzalez-Iglesias and De la Calle Maldonado, 'El Acompañamiento Educativo, Una Mirada Ampliada Desde La Antropología Personalista'.

51 Jonathan M. Tirrell et al., 'Exploring the Role of the "Big Three" Features of Effective Youth Development Programs in El Salvador: The Sample Case of Programs of Compassion International', *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 45, no. 6 (5 November 2021): 524–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650254211022858>.

52 Pope Francis, 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit', 188.

on many occasions during the most pressing months of the pandemic.⁵³ This approach poses new research perspectives on the pedagogical possibilities offered by the elderly in the era of hyperconnection for the formation of the identity of children and adolescents. Some preliminary studies in this line demonstrate the need to establish social policies that emphasise the interaction between grandchildren and grandparents given its great benefits for both parties.⁵⁴

Thirdly, the cruciality to encourage social justice among university students also supports what has been pointed out by various authors who endorse the importance of promoting social responsibility in university students as a fundamental part of their training.⁵⁵ Therefore, research on the characteristics of these volunteering experiences that especially influence the construction of identity offers research horizons of which the results would be very enlightening for designing service-learning experiences that help young people to discover their relational dimension to the fullest.

Finally, John Paul II clearly envisioned a formative need that is now being echoed by philosophers such as Bellamy:⁵⁶ the importance of cultural transmission. In a context where roots are disappearing, reclaiming the importance of culture becomes essential, and in educational contexts where competency-based learning takes precedence over learning knowledge,⁵⁷ reclaiming the authentic encounter of young people with their culture as a means not only for personal but also community flourishing becomes a matter of urgency.

Pedagogical Conclusions

There is no doubt that the multiple coronavirus restrictions that have occurred in recent months at the international level have changed the way we think about others. A suspicious gaze towards the other is becoming common in our society. The effects of this change of gaze can be devastating not only for social harmony, but also for personal flourishing. As noted throughout the article, this crisis of gaze profoundly affects people's ability to recognise their relational dimension. This anthropological damage we are experiencing is especially dangerous for young people. Youth is a time for the discovery of personal identity and this discovery requires the recognition of the dialogical dimension of the person. Both Pope Francis and St John Paul II have offered very interesting keys for educational institutions to help young people build their identity in the midst of a liquid world. Through this article, we have tried to offer four concrete strategies that can be of great help in both formal and non-formal educational settings.

First, helping students who are seeking for meaning requires helping students contemplate, which is the first step towards reflecting about the big questions. In order to contemplate, not only should Humanities subjects such as Philosophy, Music, Literature, or Arts play an important role in the educational curriculums, but they also need to be taught in a way that allows students to have a true encounter with their own culture and with themselves. Therefore, both establishing

53 Stephany Bravo-Segal and Feliciano Villar, 'La Representación de Los Mayores En Los Medios Durante La Pandemia COVID-19: ¿hacia Un Refuerzo Del Edadismo?', *Revista Española de Geriatria y Gerontología* 55, no. 5 (September 2020): 266–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regg.2020.06.002>.

54 Rosa Ana Alonso Ruiz, Magdalena Sáenz de Jubera Ocón, and Eva Sanz Arazuri, 'Tiempos Compartidos Entre Abuelos y Nietos, Tiempos de Desarrollo Personal', *Revista Española de Pedagogía* 78, no. 277 (1st September 2020), <https://doi.org/10.22550/REP78-3-2020-01>.

55 José Manuel García Ramos et al., 'La Formación En Responsabilidad Social y Su Impacto En Diversas Carreras Universitarias', *Revista de Investigación Educativa* 34, no. 2 (26 May 2016): 435, <https://doi.org/10.6018/rie.34.2.244271>.

56 François Xavier Bellamy, *Les Déshérités Ou l'urgence de Transmettre* (Plon, 2014).

57 Gregorio Luri, *La Escuela No Es Un Parque de Atracciones* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2020).

national educational policies that defend the Humanities in a technological era⁵⁸ and using teaching methodologies that promote an active learning that enables student to really contemplate and question themselves, such as the methodology proposed by Dr Bohlin,⁵⁹ become critical. As noted at the beginning, the geometric progression of technology has led to the emergence of the saturated self, which prevents the authentic encounter with oneself and with others. Therefore, today more than ever, it is necessary to foster in school environments the distancing of children and adolescents from the constant noise, from the saturation of screens, from the haste that surrounds all processes, and that allow them to discover silence, especially the inner silence necessary for contemplation. To this end, the innovative experiences carried out in different countries that promote the digital detoxification of students are very enlightening.⁶⁰

Secondly, this research has pointed out the importance of the community as an enabler of the discovery of the relational dimension of the person. Taking into account that the family as the first community place in which to make this discovery is going through great difficulties, the providing of this relational experience by the educational community becomes essential. Therefore, schools should become authentic communities where students can discover the gift character of the person. To this end, it is essential to make schools a space in which students discover that they are dependent on others, in which they feel that they are not only part of a group, but that the group would not be the same without them, and in which they discover the way in which the community offers a narrative in which to insert their own personal story within a broader framework of meaning.⁶¹ In this regard, as Francis states in different paragraphs of its text, one of the main elements of this community should be unconditional love. The experience of this unconditional love has become critical nowadays as young people tend to judge themselves with the standards of the image society in which an inhuman perfectionism regarding body image has replaced other criteria to judge oneself. In this regard, the power of feeling love as one is – with imperfections, mistakes, and weaknesses – can be extremely healing.

Third, in a society where technology as noted promotes under a false sense of connection a strong disengagement with others, like both Pontiffs pointed out, promoting social justice is a fundamental pedagogical element. Thus, educational institutions should provide young people with volunteering experiences that will help them discover what type of impact they want to bring to the world through their professional career. In this regard, there are many examples of young successful social entrepreneurs⁶² who have devoted their professional life to serving others, because as university students they lived a volunteering experience that changed their perspective. That is the reason why educational institutions should not only provide young people with this kind of social work experience, but they should also accompany the experience by dialoguing with the students about what they are living, trying to help them transcend the experience they are living, and helping them acknowledge how privileged they are and how they want to live in consequence.⁶³ Finally, as noted in the introduction, one of the main problems facing young

58 Olga San Martín, 'El Gobierno Da Luz Verde a La Desaparición de La Filosofía y de La Enseñanza Cronológica de La Historia En La ESO', *El Mundo*, 2022, <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2022/03/29/6242da77fc6c83d47c8b457f.html>.

59 Karen Bohlin, *Educando El Carácter a Través de La Literatura Despertando La Imaginación Moral En Las Aulas de Secundaria* (Madrid: Didaskalos, 2020).

60 Natalie T. Wood and Caroline Muñoz, 'Unplugged: Digital Detox Enhances Student Learning', *Marketing Education Review* 31, no. 1 (2 January 2021): 14–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2020.1836973>.

61 Juan Ambrosio Granados, 'La Comunidad Educativa, Garante Del Destino de La Persona', in *La Alianza Educativa: Introducción Al Arte de Vivir*, ed. José Granados and José Antonio Granados (Madrid, 2018).

62 Forbes, 'Las Otras 100 Mayores Fortunas de España', *Revista Forbes*, 2021, <https://forbes.es/listas/84645/las-otras-100-mayores-fortunas-de-espana/>.

63 Pilar Giménez Armentia, Daniel de la Rosa Ruiz, and Ángela Barahona Esteban, 'El Papel de La Universidad En La Erradicación de La

people in the construction of their identity is the disappearance of the anchor points that, in a world where everything changes so quickly, give meaning to their lives.⁶⁴ As both Popes pointed out, the encounter with one's own culture offers a unique possibility to respond to this current challenge. People are biographical beings and, therefore, culture, rituals, music, art, etc., allow people to construct a story about who they are, knowing that this story does not emerge from nothing, but is based on a tradition. The recognition of this tradition, which does not imply an uncritical assimilation of it, allows there to be cultivated in students the virtue of gratitude, an essential virtue to fight against the prevailing individualism.

Furthermore, we believe that these four keys highlight two educational aspects that require further consideration. First, the keys outlined above will have a much greater effect on young people as character education becomes increasingly important in educational systems. While some nations are making great efforts in this direction, others still have a long way to go.⁶⁵ Educating young people from an early age in aspects such as forgiveness, generosity and gratitude should not be reduced to mere moralistic training, but rather to a truly integral and integrating experience, which will later allow other more complex aspects to be built on solid ground. Secondly, in recent years, disciplines related to the Theory of Education such as Philosophy or Anthropology of Education have been relegated to the background, while other disciplines of an applied nature have experienced great growth. In this sense, we consider it very important to reclaim the importance of these disciplines, since they allow educators to clearly discern what the great challenges are that they face, what the purpose is of their educational action, and what the best means are to achieve it.

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64 François Xavier Bellamy, *Permanecer. Para Escapar Del Tiempo Del Movimiento Perpetuo* (Madrid: Encuentro, 2020).

65 Juan Luis Fuentes, 'Educación Del Carácter En España: Causas y Evidencias de Un Débil Desarrollo', *Estudios Sobre Educación* 35 (October 2018): 353– 71, <https://doi.org/10.15581/004.35.353-371>.