

Chapter Ten

Teachers Who Reveal Jesus: How do Pre-Service Teachers Perceive their Strengths as Future Educators?

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the issue of how pre-service teachers see their strengths and weaknesses as they prepare to graduate and join the ministry of teaching. The debate between professional teacher education programs covering mandated standards as opposed to providing a deep academic, philosophical, and spiritual grounding in the teaching career is examined. A small survey was completed by a cohort of pre-service teachers in their final year of study. The results indicate that these future educators seem to be more confident with their ability to relate to students than with their ability to meet all of the mandated standards and perform all of the fine skills required in the teaching profession. The chapter concludes by suggesting that students' perceived abilities in relating to students should be nurtured by their Christian school workplaces to make these relationships count in the faith development of their students.

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It is widely recognised in education circles that the quality of learning happening in a school learning environment is related to the

level of engagement the teachers can foster. Braunack (2019) states that ‘After 35 years of teaching young children and tertiary students, I am learning to forgive myself for my mistakes, but I am passionate about the chance to improve the quality of my engagement because this is what produces the best outcomes for children’ (p. 27).

Levels of engagement of students have long been linked with teacher confidence and enjoyment in teaching (Martin, 2006). This is well known and experienced by teachers. Teven and McCroskey (1997) demonstrated that the perception of students is that they learn a lot more from a caring teacher, and when they feel accepted by teachers it leads to greater engagement not only in the cognitive domain but also in emotional space, which leads on to positive behaviours (Connell, 1985).

While student engagement is currently topical (Eccles, 2016; Pedler, Yeigh, & Hudson, 2020), it is questionable as to whether teachers have a strong grasp on the elements of the classroom environment that lead to positive engagement in the learning environment. For example, Goldspink et al. (2008) found that there was a discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs concerning students, their background and specific needs, and the way they catered for these students in their classrooms. Likewise, Harris (2008) found that some teachers put engagement down as purely behavioural while others recognise some emotional or cognitive triggers that impact student engagement. As Christian educators, we would desire that engagement in the special character of our schools would include each of these elements so that students can think, feel and enact the revealing of Jesus in their learning environments. Pedler et al. (2020, p. 50) refer to the work of Fredricks et al. (2016) in giving definitions to the types of engagement teachers would wish for in their classrooms. ‘Behavioural engagement includes effort, persistence, attention, asking questions, participation’; ‘Emotional engagement includes affective reactions in the classroom, such as boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, identification with school’; ‘Cognitive engagement includes investment in learning, self-regulation, preference for a challenge and hard work, going beyond requirements, effort in mastering new knowledge and skills and using learning strategies’.

This pretext leads on to the question as to what are the most important skills pre-service teachers need to acquire during their

time at university. It is clear that not a lot of learning happens when a lack of engagement exists, but regulatory bodies delight in providing a plethora of standards, many of them quite refined skills, that the courses need to ensure are taught, practiced, and assessed, to maintain their accreditation. For example, in Australia, there are 37 standards that need to be covered (*Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership* (AITSL), n.d.). Reid (2019) believes that using AITSL's definition of a 'quality teacher' alongside a set of standards is evidence that teacher education has been 'domesticated' and that it is not desirable that what should be an academic and professional program is reduced to a list of standards we come to rely on. She cites John Hattie who said 'at present, teacher education is little more than a cottage industry, an apprenticeship rather than a profession, and it is devoid of debate about the effect of teacher education programme memes on student learning' (Hattie, 2016, p. 29).

Indeed, some of our core values, including Christian studies classes, are difficult to schedule into the program because of the rigour with which mandated standards need to be covered. This is not a problem unique to Australia. A teacher educator has the same concern for pre-service teaching in England in stating that 'teacher education for the FE sector should be directed towards increasing the autonomy of teachers and be constructed around a body of professional knowledge rather than the long list of statutory professional standards that shape current provision in England' (Orr, 2012, p. 51).

There exists no doubt, however, that there are many core skills that teachers need to encounter. As identified by Sutton (2012), there are three interrelated dimensions of learning. They are 'the epistemological, the ontological and the practical' (p. 31). While he is relating these to how students react to the feedback they get on assessments, the same is true of the way students adapt to their pre-service teacher education and the components and standards they need to engage in. The epistemological dimension is the way learners take on new academic knowledge. This could be a knowledge of the curriculum, the standards, the theory behind the standards, and the other learning theories, teaching strategies, and assessment techniques they will need in their career. According to Knight (2016, p. 11), 'The study of epistemology deals with issues related to the dependability of knowledge and the validity of the sources through which we gain

information.’ The ontological dimension is the metaphysical side where there is an engagement of the students’ selves as they develop an identity as a teacher. They will ask what the meaning of their existence is and what their existence is going to mean to the world and to their students in particular. This is where they get to know who they are as a person and how their identity fits with the role of teacher and how they will work a Christian worldview into their classrooms. The practical dimension is how the student goes about applying a combination of the first two dimensions; that is, how they put into action what they have learned about pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, and knowledge about their being and how they as a person relate to the classroom.

Pre-service teachers regularly return from their placements saying they have learned more in a few weeks working in the classroom with their supervising teachers than they have in several years of tertiary study. When questioned closely, they have certainly learned a lot of curricula knowledge and practical classroom practices, but have generally had little time for the ontological dimension, including reflection. Indeed, as valuable as the learning is that has taken place, it is often modelled after the supervising teacher and sometimes little has been achieved in terms of the student developing their identity. This leaves a gap for the initial teacher education programs at the universities to fill, while trying to cover the standards.

In the current era where teachers and teaching are perceived to be lacking in quality as evidenced by our international ranking in standardised tests, it appears that teacher education is forced to move towards a ‘tick box’ approach where, as already mentioned, it is easy to disregard teacher identity, teacher values, and the individual input of each potential teacher. In the same area of concern is the possibility that the ‘why’ of teaching is neglected. There has been a push in the last decade towards the apprenticeship model of teaching where students spend a large proportion of the course time in one classroom (Loughran & Menter, 2019). The impact is that the pre-service teacher is absorbed into the culture and sociology of the school and classroom where they are placed. The obvious outcome is that the next generation of teachers will emulate what they have seen and experienced in one school. This may be an excellent outcome or it may be a poor outcome, dependent on a large range of factors, but

it does lend itself to recycling the current classroom practices and re-creating the next generation of education.

This is where university-based teacher education programs have a special place. Teaching must be understood as a discipline in itself (Loughran & Russell, 2009) and that discipline needs to have a home (Furlong, 2013). According to Loughran and Menter (2019, p. 217), ‘teacher educators should themselves be the scholars who facilitate the learning by students of teaching about the knowledge and practice of teaching through quality

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These programs have the responsibility of helping students form their worldview and their beliefs about the nature of learning, to create their own teacher identity, and to imagine the type of classroom environment they want to develop. They can use their professional experience placements as examples to draw on in this ontological process. ‘Approaching teaching as a reflective practitioner involves infusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity, resulting in developing a deliberate code of conduct’ (Larrivee, 2000, p. 293).

Van Manen (2016) believes that the true value of reflection is when it works together with pedagogy. It involves tacit knowledge, is relational, and involves a sense of being in the world. Teaching involves mechanical processes but is not a mechanical career. Van Manen (1991) as cited by Hébert (2015) adds that ‘Tact then is an instantaneous capacity for mindful action’, a ‘form of interaction’ wherein pedagogues become ‘immediately active in a situation: emotionally, responsively, mindfully’, ‘engaged sensitively, reflectively with a child’ (p. 367).

The emotional aspects of teaching and the idea of emotional intelligence are growing areas of attention and research in teaching (Gallardo, Tan, & Gindidis, 2019). This level of awareness is twofold. First, the pre-service teacher needs to be aware of their emotions and possible reactions to scenarios. Second, there needs to be an awareness on the part of the pre-service teacher that they will need to deal with the emotional needs of the students in their classes.

As teacher education units work to tick off mandated standards and enable students to pass through learning thresholds (Meyer & Land, 2003) to becoming a teacher, they need to have teacher education students working on the ontology of who they are, how they fit into society, what the nature is of their spirituality and how this will be transmitted to students. What in their history and culture will shape their identity and how will this be interpreted by their students? With regard to the theories that students learn about teaching, Smith (2011, pp. 13–14) says:

But I suspect that few of us recognize in those theories what we understand to be most important about ourselves as people. Something about them fails to capture our deep subjective experience as persons, crucial dimensions of the richness of our lives, what thinkers in previous ages might have called our ‘souls’ or ‘hearts’. That is not a fatal flaw for such theories. But it does raise questions about such an apparent mismatch between scholarly theory and personal experience.

The question then, for Christian teachers, is how we match learning theories about who we are as people and our life experience and translate that into presenting a Christian worldview that is not only palatable to students but is desirable to them. How do we allow God to use our flawed humanity to reach students for His kingdom?

The small study reported on in this chapter involves final year teacher education students deciding how they believe they will perform when they are practising teachers. Their predictions must be based on their learning and reflections from their tertiary studies and their experiences in classrooms, as they work through their professional experience. This learning will have involved the three domains mentioned earlier: factual/theoretical knowledge, knowledge based on practice, and ontological or knowledge of self. While each of these involves a combination of cognitive and emotional responses, developing an understanding of self is prone to engender emotions (Anderson, 2016; Yang, 2019). Indeed, as pre-service teachers are exposed to the ontological side of learning, they will find a crossover between emotion and cognition and find that their history, culture and social context will be interrogated (Day & Leitch, 2001).

Reid (2019) places the discussion of student emotions, attitudes and understandings of self in a practical light. She talks about pre-

service teachers preparing well for the ‘struggle’ to come to terms with the needs of their students. It is a difficult task to achieve this without having their sense of being and a knowledge of where they belong in the world of teaching.

I will argue for the idea of a ‘good enough’ teacher education, one that explicitly aims to produce what I call, perhaps provocatively, a ‘good enough’ teacher—someone who knows she can never be fully prepared for the schools of today; who knows she is not ‘classroom-ready’ when she starts her career; but who is well prepared for her struggle every day, in and through her practice, to know and meet the needs of her students (Reid, 2019, p. 715).

In the study featured in this chapter, teacher education students in their final year of study were asked 90 questions in class about how they see themselves as future teachers. This survey was constructed from the work of Tamir (2020) and Gallardo et al. (2019). The survey was used with a sample of 32 students and was tested for reliability and showed a high Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient of 0.947. This high value does not mean that the survey for this sample is unidimensional, but that it has a high level of internal consistency.

When the student responses were collated, it was found that there was a distinct gap between how the students saw themselves as people (being), how they related to what they had learned (knowing), and how they were going to use this in the classroom (acting). The results showed that they were confident in their personal ability to work with students and satisfied with their personhood (Smith, 2003, 2015), but were uncertain about how they would proceed to implement some of the finer skills they had learned.

Table 10.1 shows the ten aspects of teaching that students ranked the highest (on a scale of four) when they saw themselves as qualified teachers. It shows the ten aspects they do not see as coming naturally to them and will take a lot of work for them to achieve. The means and standard deviations of each aspect are given.

Table 10.1 Mean and Standard Deviation of the top 10 and lower 10 student assessments of them as a teacher

	Top 10	Mean	Standard Deviation	Dimension (E, O, or P)
1	demonstrating respect in their relationships with students	3.81	0.39	O
2	seeking opportunities to build relationships of respect and trust with students	3.78	0.41	O
3	displaying genuine enthusiasm when engaging with students in the classroom	3.72	0.45	O
4	encouraging conversations about learning	3.69	0.46	E
5	demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject area	3.66	0.47	O
6	being trustworthy in the students' eyes	3.66	0.47	O
7	demonstrating a sense of humour and an acceptance of students' humour in the classroom	3.66	0.54	O
8	continuously reinforcing a caring classroom environment where students know they are valued	3.63	0.54	O
9	seeking and incorporating students' ideas and viewpoints into learning contexts	3.59	0.55	E
10	demonstrating an invitational, inclusive manner when interacting with students	3.59	0.49	O
	Bottom 10			
81	ensuring lesson planning reflects the literacy and numeracy needs and potential of students as identified by evidence	2.94	0.66	E
82	sharing clear, written learning intentions and success criteria with students	2.91	0.58	P
83	checking that students understand learning intentions and success criteria	2.88	0.54	P
84	ensuring students are engaged with learning throughout the lesson	2.88	0.60	P
85	articulating high learning expectations of students on a regular basis	2.88	0.65	P
86	ensuring homework is relevant and is checked carefully	2.84	0.83	P
87	co-constructing timeframes for activities with students	2.84	0.62	P
88	asking feedforward academic questions to help students clarify deepen or broaden their thinking	2.84	0.62	P
89	providing frequent and specific academic feedback, related to the learning intentions and success criteria	2.84	0.57	P
90	seeking the voices of the local community as part of the learning context	2.56	0.61	P

To substantiate the multidimensional nature of the survey, factor analysis was carried out using principal component extraction. Coefficients less than 0.3 were suppressed. Four distinct factors were established. These appeared to fall into the categories of pre-service teacher attributes (56 items); planning (16 items); culture and collaboration (10 items); classroom management and differentiation (8 items).

Although four scales emerged from the data, they were heavily loaded towards student attributes. Out of the top 10 aspects of teaching, seven are from the teacher attributes scale, two are from the planning and implementation scale, and one aspect did not make a scale and will be eliminated from the survey in the future applications. Out of the lower 10 aspects of teaching as rated, eight are from the teacher attributes scale, one is from the planning and implementation scale, and one is from the culture and collaboration scale. It is interesting that both the aspects pre-service teachers see themselves as being strong in, and those they expect to be weaker in, come largely from the same scale. When taking a close look at the nature of the items, however, the top 10 concern their use of attributes that are natural to them and the lower 10 involve largely using their attributes to communicate with students and community on professional issues.

The question can therefore be asked as to how the pre-service teacher's responses to the top 10 and lower 10 aspects have been differentiated by them. As discussed earlier, the profession of 'teacher' can be categorised into three dimensions: the *epistemological*, the *ontological*, and the *practical*. Table 10.1 illustrates which of these categories each aspect falls into. It is interesting that all but two of the cluster of 10 aspects pre-service teachers see themselves as being strong in, can be categorised into the *ontological* dimension. It shows that all but one of the 10 aspects pre-service teachers believe they will need to work on come from the *practical* dimension.

It is interesting to note that the aspect of their predicted performance that pre-service teachers are most confident about (highest mean rating of 3.81/4.0) has the lowest spread of scores and therefore the most agreement between participants (lowest standard deviation of 0.39). Apart from one of the top ten aspects, as the mean score decreases, the variation between the responses of the pre-service teachers increases.

It is pleasing to see that students are confident with the human side of their upcoming careers in teaching. The aspects they are most content with apply to them as people being able to develop relationships with students based on trust and respect, being enthusiastic about the content of their teaching when engaging students in learning. They are confident of being able to talk to students, to be inclusive and respond to their ideas and initiatives. They are sure that they will be able to create a caring learning environment and demonstrate a sense of humour.

These aspects contribute to a positive learning environment where genuine engagement in learning can take place. This type of learning environment is a place where students can experience the spirituality and Christian input a teacher can provide (Knight, 2016; Murison & Benson, 2018).

In terms of the ten responses from students that scored the highest, they can be categorised in two ways:

- They are largely ontological in that they see these aspects as their emerging identity as a teacher, which will include who they are as a person/teacher and how they are seen by the students. This is where they can mesh their beliefs on revealing Jesus into their learning environments with their own person.
- They are largely from the 'teacher attributes' scales that emerged from the factor analysis of the data. This means the participants were most confident with the way aspects of their personalities would work in the learning environment.

Additional research needs to explore the reasons why pre-service teachers answered this way. Is it because they wish to model their teaching practice on caring teachers whom they have experienced in their school lives? Is it because they have a desire to be popular in the eyes of their students? Is it because out of the 90 aspects presented to them, the ones they are most confident with require little study or experience to achieve? A qualitative study would help to identify whether any of these factors are relevant.

In conducting this further research, one would want to discover whether the ontological aspects of pre-service teacher learning had contributed to the significant result of them rating their future

strengths as teachers as being their power to relate. That is, have the future teachers taken their history and culture into account in picturing themselves as teachers? Have they got a good picture of who they are and what makes them that way? Do they recognise that this type of understanding of themselves as a child of God will position them as good role models?

For many years it has been known that the relationship a teacher has with their students is instrumental in bringing out the best in those students. Knight (2016, p. 67) quotes researchers from 40 years ago (Pullias & Young, 1977) who say that:

When people are asked to describe the teacher that did the most for them, again and again, they mention a teacher, often the only one in their experience, who believed in them, who saw their special talents, not only what they were but even more what they wanted to be and could be.

The next question that has to be asked as a result of this study is why the aspects of being a teacher, that pre-service teachers are less confident about, are mostly practical skill-based tasks such as prioritising literacy and numeracy, making learning intentions clear, consulting with the community, providing feedback and checking homework. This list of tasks is part of a normal day for a teacher and is part of mandated standards graduate teachers need to be competent in. These are the skills that are taught, practised and assessed. In many ways, these are the focus of the design and structure of the initial teacher education program and yet they are ranked last. Again, further qualitative research into why this is the case would be a worthwhile project. Have these skills not been taught properly? Is it that students find this type of work boring and therefore cannot see themselves as being good at it? Perhaps the students believe that it has been taught well, but it will take experience for them to become proficient in these skills.

Implications for initial teacher education programs are several, the most important of which is to ask questions of the program intent. Are pre-service teachers in touch with their purpose in being a teacher and do they see themselves as developing good relationships with students to create engaging learning environments and presenting Christian worldviews? In seeking to create good relationships with their students, are they 'living out the biblical story in the new

contexts in which they find themselves? To do this is to be engaged in transforming, cross-cultural mission. It is to contextualise the Christian message in modern situations' (Cooling, 2010, p. 27).

The Christian teacher educator will therefore be pleased with future teachers who are confident in their abilities to form relationships, and to facilitate the deep analysis of the Christian worldview so that these relationships can model the message of Jesus for the next generation.

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