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Pastoral Care, Action Research, and Teaching as a Profession: Can 'Joining the Dots' Facilitate Teacher Reflection on Practice and Identity?

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Can 'joining the dots' facilitate teacher reflection on practice and identity?

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Introduction

Educators have increasingly demonstrated commitment to, and invested much effort in advancing the cause of pastoral care, action research, and the status of teaching as a profession, over the last two decades. What is largely unrecognised is how these areas of education are linked. A shared focus of attention—evident in educational literature and professional practice—however, constitutes only a minor nexus between and among these three emerging areas of education.

Noteworthy and central to all three areas appears to be the idea of *making a difference in the lives of others*. This article explores some of the challenges and complexities inherent in existing and potential linkages, including some disjunctions, and their implication for teachers.

Pastoral care (PC)
A needs context and a ministry of care

In western societies, negative influences are impacting many students' lives and their learning at school. The 300,000 Child Safety Protection reportings in NSW alone confirm the claim the Department of Community Services was 'drowning' in the number of cases referred to them.[1] Similarly, the diary of a young girl in the print media by a non-government charity organisation, typifies and individualises the challenges of "680,000 disadvantaged kids living in homes where no parent is working".[2] The young age of some of the affected children may locate them outside schools' domain; never-the-less, they will sooner or later come under the care of schools.

Pastoral care, in a school context, is an ethic of care that demonstrates an active concern for the wellbeing and wholeness of all members of the school community. In the past, pastoral care programs were often perceived as competing with academic ones. Such perceptions of an oppositional relationship tended to be counterproductive. In contrast, recent research findings from the NSW independent schools sector concluded, "pastoral care and academic progress are inextricably linked"[3], underlining that effective pastoral care in schools calls for a pedagogy that integrates the cognitive, social-relational, emotional and physical dimensions of students' lives.

In Christian schools, this occurs in a spiritual environment grounded in scriptural values and teachings that incorporate horizontal as well as vertical relationships; providing hope, healing and direction to individuals. Approaches of this kind emphasise the education of the *whole* person and frequently employ aspects of experiential education.[4] Furthermore, from a structural viewpoint, pastoral care may become the 'umbrella' for a number of initiatives which schools might run, such as anti-bullying, Life Education[5] and Peer Support[6] programs, including a fully functioning chaplaincy ministry.[7]

Pastoral care is now a *sine qua non* for schools. They are expected to perform broad pastoral tasks—effected at a proactive, reactive, or developmental level—that may be summarised as providing nurture and healing; facilitating the learning of knowledge and acquisition of skills that develop resilience; promoting responsible self-disciplined conduct for community membership; and a whole-school approach that emphasises awareness and participation—*vis a vis* a *modus operandi* that is the preserve of specialist school staff.[8] The beneficiaries of pastoral care may range from specific individuals, to (gender) groups and classes, or even whole school communities, as in the case of trauma and crisis management. The various pastoral tasks, levels of effect; beneficiaries and their respective subsets mentioned above, illustrate the rich and diverse framework in which pastoral care occurs.

Caring is viewed by teachers as an important personality trait in their colleagues. US research shows 86% of teachers perceived their colleagues as *caring*, higher than any other trait.[9] Students also

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place a high value on teachers' caring, as Sheila Bethel contends: "Students don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."[10] Current Australian of the Year, Professor Patrick McGorrey— adolescent mental health expert—in his acceptance speech stated that Australia is "in need of a system of care with early intervention". Pastoral care endeavours to address that need in a school setting.

Next, before attempting to explore some meaningful initial linkages, it is necessary to provide a brief coverage of the second area under examination.

Action research (AR)
Definition and brief historical background
There is no agreed definition for action research.[11] One educator has defined AR as:

> Any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counsellors, or other stakeholders in the teaching / learning environment to gather information about the ways that their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved.[12]

The philosophical antecedents of action research point to phenomenology. Drawing on aspects of the work of various educators, social psychologists and philosophers spanning the 20th century and several continents, AR has built up wide acceptance with a diverse 'clientele', mainly in the social sciences. The numerous conferences and journals presently devoted to action research are indicators of its current prominence, together with the AR theses completed at the MEd, EdD, MPhil and PhD levels.

The nature of action research
Action research represents a new orientation to research rather than a methodology. Partly a reaction to the logical empiricist approaches to enquiry that emphasise statistical analysis, objectivity and values neutrality, it indicates a paradigmatic shift from a *modern* to a *postmodern* mindset.

AR, in classroom and other educational contexts, challenges teachers to assume responsibility for their work practices (resolving specific, complex and problematic educational situations) and professional development. The AR process, although variously practised and described, basically consists of a cyclical 'model'[13] that involves teachers in:

- *identifying a particular problem or focus area for improvement.* This leads to formulating key questions and, in turn, necessitates planning that may be informed by educational literature and research. Collegial help may also be sought.
- *ethically collecting relevant, evidential data.* This requires acting on preceding planning. Data collection methods may range, among others, from teachers (and colleagues) observing, journaling and interviewing, to students completing group tasks, projects and questionnaires or doing tests; multiple methods may even be employed.
- *making sense of the collected data.* Analysing and interpreting the data requires asking incisive questions: Are there sufficient data? Are they valid? What patterns or themes emerge from the data? Is there broad agreement among data from different sources? Do the data facilitate the construction of concept maps? Could the data analysis benefit from the comments of a 'critical friend'?
- *reflecting on what has been learned and deciding: What should be done next?* Having reached this point, is it constructive to engage in another cycle of the process; perhaps with some modifications, before deciding on future directions regarding the identified problem?

The four-step cycle summarised above is descriptive rather than prescriptive. It should not be regarded as a scripted 'lock-step' process. Indeed practitioners, upon reflection, may revisit any previous step(s) and make modifications before proceeding further. Reflection thus becomes a dynamic element of the process.

Stringer[14] condenses the inquiry cycle into a look-think-act process, within the phases of planning, instruction and evaluation (not unlike the ancient transformative practice of reading Scripture, *lectio divinia*: read, think, pray, live).[15]

Levels, modes and performance texts
Action research can be conducted at various *levels* and in different *modes*. AR may be carried out at the level of the *individual*; it may target a *group* or *class*, or have a *whole-school* focus and even beyond, with beneficiaries of the inquiry also being 'collegial participants'.

The literature commonly identifies three AR modes: *technical*, *practical* and *emancipatory* (or *critical*).[16] Any one of these theoretical perspectives may typically characterise an action research endeavour. Respective school examples are, instrumental actions assisting learners master spelling rules in English or creating mnemonics to recall the periodic table in Chemistry; motivating students to participate in cooperative learning; and

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enabling and empowering victims of disadvantage and / or abuse to become resilient, self-confident and independent individuals. The latter is typified in the literature by such inspirational classics as Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher*,[17] an autobiographical account of raising the self-esteem and consciousness level of children in a small school on the north-east coast of the north island of New Zealand; and also *Letter to a teacher*,[18] the reflective educational experiences of the schoolboys of Barbiana and Lorenzo Milani, maverick priest and educator, in northern Italy. The critical mode of AR also aims to expose and change unjust, oppressive or exploitive power relationships and socio-economic structural systems. For Christians, these "social evils: sin embedded in societal systems"[19] are fiercely denounced by Old Testament prophets.

In contrast to written and published documents or online text, action research may also be disseminated and shared in creative ways by means of *performance texts* such as poetry, music, audio-visuals and drama.[20] It is not difficult to imagine the powerful effect that some emancipatory AR case studies, creatively presented, might have on audiences.

Some initial intersections

As foreshadowed in the introduction, pastoral care, action research and the notion of teaching as a profession (TP) incorporate powerful common values. Most important, PC, AR and TP uphold a clear commitment to the improvement of lived human experience by addressing social problems of varying complexity; an outcome that might be achieved irrespective of whether one operates from a secular or religious platform.

Perceptions of AR as a moral and ethical stance committed to action resulting in qualitative change[21], apply equally to pastoral care in schools and to the conceptualisation of an authentic profession. The latter's meaning is derived from 'to profess', which denotes 'believing and taking a stand'. It presupposes a commitment to service and the good of others, a value enshrined in many codes of conduct and ethics of professions. Teachers in their roles as carers and practitioner researchers are thus mandated to *act* in intellectually and morally responsible ways and incorporate values and human interests in their endeavours. This translates into research not being pursued for the sake of curiosity or knowledge *per se*, but being applied for worthwhile purposes. Knowledge alone does not lead to transformation. Literally thousands of education research reports, gathering dust on bureaucratic shelves are often testimony to 'lifeless' knowledge and values. Words and talk are

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not enough. As has been argued, values remain abstractions until put into practice.[22]

A Christian viewpoint, such as Eugene Peterson's, speaks directly to this challenge:

> What we *know* about God and what we *do* for God have a way of getting broken apart in our lives. The moment the organic unity of belief and behaviour is damaged in any way, we are incapable of living out the full humanity for which we were created (emphases added).[23]

At this juncture, it is reasonable to conclude that PC and AR both draw teachers' attention to schools' human dimension and point toward a particular conception of their profession.

Teaching as a profession (TP)
Continuing issues

The very notion of what constitutes a profession is problematic. The term is beset with ambiguities and conceptual difficulties. As a buzzword clamouring for public attention, it is claimed by or applied to occupations that extend from arbourists, basketballers, plumbers and hitmen, to architects, lawyers and neurosurgeons. Long-standing traits theory presents a list of specific criteria that form an archetype of a profession. It is conceptualised as an occupation that requires skills to solve complex problems; initial and ongoing learning and mastery of theoretical knowledge in a tertiary context; performs a crucial social service; involves socialisation into a set of values; controls its functions, workplace, credentialing and ethical practice.[24] This raises the questions: Is teaching a profession? Does it meet the criteria?

Answers are often conditional, depending on contexts of time and location. Two decades ago, teaching would not have been considered a profession, even in western countries. In Japan, teaching is currently not regarded as a fully fledged profession; although nursing is.[25] By contrast, in 2009, Holly et al. in North America, perceived education as being among "[t]he *classic* professions".[26] A strict application of the above criteria finds teaching 'short of the mark'. For instance, teachers mostly are employees of large bureaucracies. Teachers are not in control of their workplace and, "When was the last time that teachers disciplined one of their colleagues for a recognised misdemeanour, perhaps removing their right to teach?" asks Neil Hooley.[27] Just as important, according to McCulloch et al., "may be the way teachers are regarded by governments and the community", and how teachers see themselves;[28] the latter relates to their identity and its formation.

More than a profession

As part of a larger teacher population, Christian teachers are constantly exhorted in the literature and by education bodies to perform their various responsibilities and tasks, as professionals. Is it prudent to borrow uncritically from and conform to the idealisation of a profession? It is questionable; given "the pathologies of prevailing professional practice"[29] and a suspicious public that formerly regarded professionals as 'social trustees', but now views them merely as experts who market and hire their skills at a price.[30] A cynic may conclude that the term is merely an aspirational appellation based on a set of ascribed values, or an exclusive idealisation of one's work that strengthens claims for status and hence increased remuneration in a competitive labour market.

From a Christian standpoint, it seems both biblical and desirable, to perceive teaching as more than a profession; rather as a *servanthood ministry* that emphasises, integrates and practices the kingdom values lived by Jesus. Technical rationality—as skills and expertise—is not devalued by such a perspective; rather it realigns and validates these on the basis of their values underpinnings and life integration.

A wider exploration of linkages

The link between action research and the notion of teaching as a profession has potential for positive developments. AR reinforces the service orientation expected from the professions, which is so evident in pastoral care. Simultaneously, teachers need to be aware that they don't 'lapse' into an idealised model of the professions where, for instance, *affective neutrality*—a personal detachment from the client, i.e. students—is a guiding principle.

Symptomatic of the problem is the televised case of Dr. Charlie Teo, a very skilled, but controversial Sydney brain surgeon who "[r]ides a motor cycle. Wears Hawaiian shirts to work. Laughs and cries with his patients. Befriends them; befriends their families. Shows interest in…in them beyond just a neurological aspect."[31] The specialist is out of favour with many of his peers. He apparently has little regard for 'objective distancing' between doctor and patient. Also, his relations with the media leave much to be desired; an area where "[t]he medical profession has an unwritten code of silence, almost."[32] In short, his 'colourful' behaviour doesn't conform to the accepted norms of the medical profession; professional culture takes precedence over authentic human relationships.

The compelling values advocated by and practised in pastoral care and action research call upon teachers to reconceptualise their professional identity and 'model' of teaching as a profession. Such a repositioning will have to compete with the *managerial professionalism*[33] currently elevated and promoted by state and federal educational jurisdictions in Australia. Managerial professionalism applies private sector enterprise principles, ethics and vocabulary to education. Its privileged vocabulary, signifying what really counts, *inter alia* includes: *performance indicators, tests and measurements, benchmarks, best practice, efficiency, measurable outcomes, achievable targets, appraisals and reviews*, and *incentives and rewards*. One of the touted outcomes is performance related pay (and sanctions). In this context, there is a real danger of governments seeing education both as an instrument of economic policy and a commodity in the marketplace, where students—tracked by proposed identity numbers—and parents are *clients*, and where principals operate as *managers* overseeing productivity to set performance standards by a skilled contracted teaching workforce.

Two examples epitomise this viewpoint. First, the response in an interview of the current Deputy Prime Minister; minister for education, employment and workplace relations and social justice and inclusion: "I'll be happy to be referred to simply as the minister for productivity."[34] The 'deep grammar' of the minister's language seems indicative of the dominant priorities and ruling market place values embraced.

Second, the recent construction and publication of NSW league tables, in the media, of National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results: This is no different from the listings on the stock market! The data were made available to the general public by the Commonwealth Government *for the purpose of transparency*, but appear to underline a strategy of 'naming and shaming' to improve teacher productivity. A former Director of Education in NSW and more recently Head of the UK Curriculum Authority has clearly stated that NAPLAN results should be used principally for diagnostic purposes. He noted that overseas experience has shown that many teachers spent the term before the scheduled battery of tests teaching to the tests;[35] an observation borne out by the reported comments of a parent, whose children attend a Sydney school that is very highly ranked on the published league tables.

> There was enormous pressure at the school on both teachers and students from day one of term one to achieve good results. The 'preparation' for the tests was intense, with extreme pressure to practise through regular class time and heavy-duty homework. Many children felt overwhelmed and

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stressed by the level of work and the performance expectations. Publishing these tables endorses this type of approach.[36]

There is thus a credible possibility of the NAPLAN tests becoming an example of 'the tail wagging the educational dog'.

Even more important, how should one view a profession that accommodates its pedagogies and ethics to performance values? NAPLAN tests are mandatory across Australia and teachers have been required to administer tests and participate in data collection processes, knowing the data are likely to be or will be misused and thus contribute, either directly or indirectly to negative educational outcomes. These include narrowing the curriculum; increasing rote learning; and labelling and stigmatising students and teachers in low-ranking schools, among others.

Furthermore, managerial professionalism operating in a performance culture[37] requires time-consuming record keeping, often to the detriment of teachers reflecting on and improving their pedagogies. In this culture, teacher productivity outweighs integrity; also collegial competition and performance comparisons—the NAPLAN test results being just one example—are rife. The culture not only advances a particular model for the teaching profession, but also poses a threat to the identity of teachers—who they are and how they see themselves. Collins and McNiff challenge teachers to "carefully consider the values base of their work and whether or not those values are being realised in practice,"[38] further, to endeavour arriving "at a position where they may say that their values are being lived more fully in their practice".[39]

One might ask: Which values? Decided by whom? For teachers serving in Christian faith-based schools, this is unlikely to be a contested area. For them the values enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount should act as their guide in reconceptualising teaching as a profession. These values represent a culture driven by God-affirming *vis a vis* God-denying ground motives,[40] as briefly exemplified below:

> A servanthood ministry eschews elitism and upward mobility. Teachers in their biblical role as stewards appreciate the gifts and talents entrusted by God to individuals for uplifting, guiding and benefiting their learning communities.

Service rendered by teachers is an end in itself. It is not some abstract notion, but a tacit recognition of the intrinsic value of others for whom Christ gave his life.

Christian teachers find their core identity in Christ. In Him is found the answer to their question,

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> **"**

who am I? And through Him they connect with a fellowship of believers that represents a loving support network. This relationship subsumes the recognised function of most professions in having an important socialising effect on, and giving an identity to individuals.

The lives of Christian teachers are not compartmentalised into *personal* and *teaching* boxes that are moral disjoint sets. There should be no credibility gaps; committed servants lead integrated lives that are sustained by God's grace, evidenced by humble, skilled and compassionate service.

One additional point is worth noting. Teachers in the secular arena, who commit to their students and empower them, should be commended for their efforts to make a difference. Christian teachers, however, believe that in teaching, mere human efforts are insufficient, unless empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In this article I have asserted that both students and teachers benefit from educative relationships that are underpinned by an ethic of care. Furthermore, I have argued that the shared values embedded in pastoral care and action research have the potential to reshape the traditional *conception* of profession in an educational context. This is particularly important in the present educational environment, where managerial professionalism driven by economic rationalism holds sway. Teachers in faith-based schools, who build their practice on Jesus' countercultural values, should consequently find an ally in the values embedded in PC and AR, as they reflect on their pedagogical practice and endeavour to make a difference in the lives of their learning communities. **TEACH**

Endnotes

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[7] Refer to Rieger, W. (2009). Chaplaincy in Christian schools: Towards a policy platform for productive partnerships. *TEACH Journal of Christian Education, 3*(2), 26–31.

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26 Holly, M. et al. (2009). Ibid., p.11.

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