

TEACH^R

Talk less and Yarn more: Seeking student voice to explore effective pedagogy in a Christian environment.

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Abstract

This research explores how students within a Christian school experience pedagogy and how they perceive this experience to influence them, in terms of empowerment or dis-empowerment. Photoyarn (Rogers, 2017) was the chosen methodology of this research, the motivation for the choice being drawn from the researchers own experience of marginalising research methods. This Arts based Indigenous method demonstrated the power meandering conversations (yarning) and visual listening can bring to students whose voices are not typically heard. Using a photo as a metaphor, the students were invited to respond to two prompts: 1) What is happening when you were empowered by your teachers to flourish? and 2) What is happening when you feel disempowered by your teachers? The findings from the yarns discovered an interesting relationship between disempowerment and empowerment. Flourishment was dependent on the degree to which the teacher embodied their faith through connection, relational pedagogies, and awareness of the environment. This article invites Indigenous Tertiary Education (ITE) students and the wider Christian education community to reconcile the relationship between their espoused and embodied faith. The determining factor to the success of such, is the voice of students. Through interrogating the connection between their inner worlds and outer performance, self-aware teachers are able use pedagogy as an expression of their faithful call to administer Gods kingdom here on earth.

Introduction

On the analysis of more than 9000 peer-reviewed journal articles, Smith (2018) concludes that very

little research exists which explores the impact of a Christian teacher's faith on their chosen pedagogies. His research showed that teachers were more likely to "tell" components of the biblical story for example: love your neighbour, be hospitable, act justly, love mercy, walk humbly; but seldom consider how their pedagogy might serve their educational vision. Alongside this, less than 4.8% of the 9000 peer reviewed journal articles from 1970-2017 identified "the pedagogical process or the way students experience and interpret learning" (Smith, 2018, p. 3). Smith (2018) laments that the "declarations of faith strike up a stirring tune, but it is the wild dogs of the day to day that determine our dance steps" (p. 1). More often than not, teachers are "building a wall between inner truth and outer performance" (Palmer, 1998, p. 17).

This article considers the purpose of Christian education and the effectiveness of prevailing pedagogies (Cox, 1980; Freire, 1992; Watkins, 2008) and suggests that the quality of teaching and learning within Christian education is determined by how engaged teachers are in exploring the links between their teachers' purpose and pedagogy as experienced by their students (Belcher, 2006; Duncan & Te One, 2014; Grove, 1990; Norsworthy, 2007; Postman, 1997).

Research project purpose and design

Research purpose:

This research project explores how students within a Christian school experience pedagogy and how they perceive this experience to influence them, in terms of empowerment or dis-empowerment.

The two prompts to which participants responded were:

1. What is happening when you were empowered by your teachers to flourish?
2. What is happening when you feel disempowered by your teachers?

Research design

The chosen research design drew in part from my story as an adoptee from a Romanian orphanage

“
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and the resulting suppression of my voice in published media through assuming my voice and experience of international adoption. Wolterstorff (2002) describes how the marginalized rarely have their voices heard and the injustice they experience is often enforced on them by those in authority. In choosing my methodology, I considered an approach that would position my participants not as objects of knowledge but rather as “provocateurs, as lines of flight that take us elsewhere” (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 620). This drew me to consider such qualitative methodologies that communicated the everyday lived experiences and voice of those previously silenced (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; St. Pierre, 2014; Walford, 2001; Wang, 1999).

Comprehension of social and psychological phenomena can be accessed through Visual Research Methodologies (VRM) as the richness of the reflection and evaluation processes seek to make implicit knowledge accessible (Clark, 2010; Reavey, 2011). Visual Research Methodology includes the use of visual artefacts combined with communication where participants share insights from their experiences and context with the researcher in an interview or dialogue (Emmison et al., 2012; Harper, 2002; Rose, 2016). Social research values Visual Research Methodologies as they elicit deep and interesting talk about subjects otherwise too complex to explore (Birkeland, 2013; Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Harper, 2002; Pink, 2012; Rose, 2007; 2016). Clark (2010) describes this dialogue as “visual listening” (p. 165) where participants are invited to share their experiences with reference to metaphors within images (Oliver et al., 2007; Patton et al., 2011; Rose, 2016).

Research method

A recent method of incorporating visual listening into the research design is Photoyarn. Rogers (2017) developed Photoyarn—an arts-based Indigenous method—as a modification of Photo Voice or Photo Elicitation (Wang, 1999). Instead of the terminology of dialogues or discussions to describe the process of interpreting the photos, it honours indigenous values and principles by using yarning circles as part of the data collection process. Described as a “fluid ongoing process, a moving dialogue interspersed with interjections, interpretations, and additions” (Geia et al., 2013, p. 6) yarning circles are an important part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Finding a research paradigm that invited the participants to weave their stories and experiences within their responses led me to choose the methodology, Photoyarn.

Research process

This Photoyarn research project had three phases. The planned data collection process took place over five weeks with data gathered from individuals and groups.

Phase one

After the participants accepted the invitation to join the research, a Participant Information Sheet and a written Consent Form were emailed to them. After the participants signed and returned the written consent via email; they met together at a nominated space and time selected for the initial kōrero (discussion). During this kōrero, the two prompts were shared: “What is happening when you were empowered by your teachers to flourish?” and “What is happening when you feel disempowered by your teachers?”. A two-week time frame was given to participants to create their visual artifacts as a response to the prompts. An explanation of the ethical considerations took place, noting that any photos taken were not to include students and teachers and wouldn't be published by participants to any social media platform. The Consent Form indicated the yarns would be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed with opportunity for the transcripts to be sighted and signed by participants during phase three of the project. The option was given for participants to have another person present during their yarn. During this initial kōrero, time was given for those who had questions to ask them. The school counsellor was present during Phase One to ensure that there were no concerns about influence/direction or coercion.

Phase two

The second phase consisted of one-on-one yarns where each participant responded to the two prompt questions: “What is happening when you were empowered by your teachers to flourish?” and “What is happening when you feel disempowered by your teachers?” using their visual artefacts. Some participants chose to take photos themselves, while others curated photos from the internet- specifically typing into a search engine the metaphor they wanted to encapsulate. Some participants chose to use one photo to represent their experience while others chose multiple images. Each participant was invited to choose a safe environment in which these yarns would occur. Attention to small details enabled an inclusive, relaxed, and comfortable environment such as: entering the room after the participant so they could sit in a place of their choice and, when the audio had begun recording, the phone was placed face down with no other distractions present. This phase did not have a time limit, allowing time for each

“VRM includes the use of visual artefacts combined with ... participants share[d] insights ... in an interview or dialogue”

participant to yarn in a relaxed and comfortable environment. This enacted Rogers’ (2017) intention for the yarns in this methodology to meander as the participants tell their stories (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010). It is important to note that the images as metaphor are not the data, but rather what it elicited through yarning is the gold from which findings were drawn (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Phase three

The final phase was a group yarn with all participants over kai (food). This was a space in which all participants were able to contribute and reflect on their experiences together. Initial themes from analysis of yarns were revealed as participants shared commonalities and made connections. As noted in the Participant Information Sheet, the transcripts from the individual yarns were provided to the participants to read and sign after verifying that they were a true and accurate representation of the Phase Two yarns. The participants yarned about the experience of participating in this research, leading to further thematic connections and mutual insights. A karakia (prayer) concluded this hui (group yarn).

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Findings and implications for teachers

This data analysis of the responses gained from the two prompts in the study’s three phases was completed through open coding—a process that organised the data. Thematic analysis communicated patterns that revealed when factors contributing to empowerment were missing; they experienced disempowerment (Table 1).

The final part of this article will explore how disempowerment (Figure 1), or empowerment (Figure 2) is directly dependent on the degree to which the teacher embodied their faith through firstly recognizing students’ need for relationship, secondly choosing relational pedagogies and finally sensitively implementing strategies within an awareness of the whole classroom environment.

Embodying faith through: Recognizing students’ need for relationship

Teachers should shape their teaching and learning decisions around the perception they hold of their students for how they “diagnose their students’ condition determines the nature of their remedy” (Palmer, 1998, p. 47; see also: Badley & Van Brummelen, 2012). Embodying a biblical worldview,

Table 1: Themes drawn from yarns

	The participants experienced DISEMPOWERMENT when:	The participants experienced EMPOWERMENT when:
A. Perceptions of teachers embodying their faith	Teachers didn't ignite passion for learning: - Teachers pulled on the “authority of the role” rather than offering what the 21st Century teenager needs - Teachers didn't ignite a passion for learning when stating “Here's the work, go do it” - Not matching how teachers taught with what students needed, including - Not considering student learning styles - Not revisiting material so students understand it	Teachers modelled passion and enthusiasm for learning: The way the teacher positioned themselves in relation to the subject influenced the student's experience.
B. Knowing the students as real people	Teachers viewed them all as the same rather than as individual people: - Teachers did not know what was going on in the life of students, - Students viewed as all the same, rather than individuals	Teachers recognised them as real people: - Teachers knew the students, - Talked to students about life outside of school
C. Awareness of the environment.	Teachers had no connection with the environment: Teachers didn't understand the pressure on students if the space was uncomfortable	Teachers had a connection with the environment: - Connected with students not just as school students but rather within their wholistic context - Ensured students felt comfortable in the classroom

teachers can acknowledge that each student is “a receptacle of the divine, a place where the life of God flows” (Willard, 1998, p. 14). This diagnosis recognises each student’s capacity for relationship and promotes empowerment within the classroom environment. One participant shared:

I work better if teachers are friendlier and have a connection with the students and you can talk about other stuff, not just work. For example - things that go on at home and that engages me a bit better in class.

Respondent 2

Another participant noted:

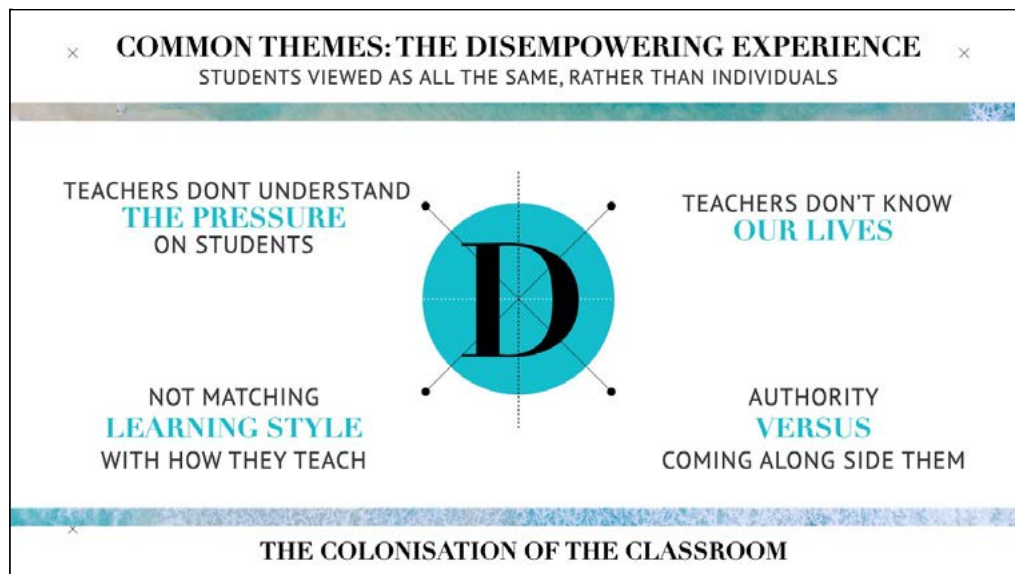
I definitely think that a good teacher that has a good relationship with students [can] have a bit of banter and a yarn about other things [it] help[s] us do well in that kind of environment.

Respondent 5

Being in relationship with the students can also interrupt the escalation of relational breakdowns within the classroom. A participant described the vulnerability of remaining in the classroom with a teacher with whom they had a negative altercation:

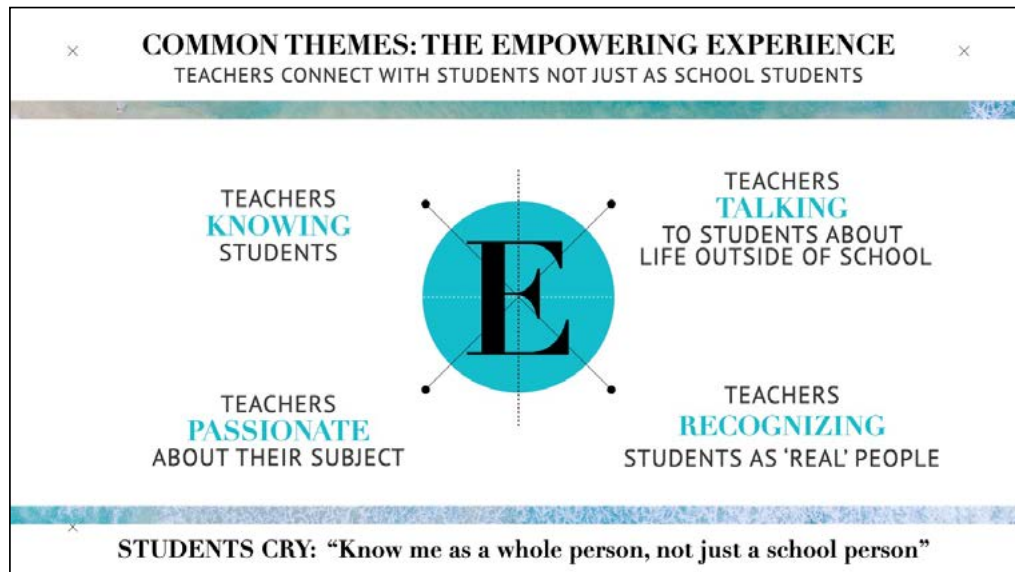
It’s hard to ask for help when you are not exactly

Figure 1: The disempowering experience



“teachers can acknowledge ... each student is ‘a receptacle of the divine, a place where the life of God flows’”

Figure 2: The empowering experience



*on the right terms with somebody. Like you don't want to ask for help after you have just been a di*k to the teacher. I guess so I don't want to go ask for help because I don't really like them cause of past experiences. I don't do much work because we don't work well together. We haven't gelled so it's awkward.* Respondent 6

When the student's relationship with the teacher was interrupted, the participant believed that no reconciliation or restoration of the relationship could occur, thus effecting his sense of achievement within that subject.

Literature suggests that teachers' interactions should be infused with promotion of social wellbeing and mutually respectful interpersonal interactions (Norsworthy, 2006; Paris, 2016; Smith, 2018).

Embodying faith through: Seeing students as real people

Recognizing students' need for a relationship informs teachers who choose relational pedagogies and so meet the inner yearning of students to approach meaning-making with awe and wonder (Gibbs, 2006; Gilbert, 2005; Kessler, 2000). Such an approach bridges the gap between the students' lives outside school and the classroom. It has the capacity to equip students "to come at life venturesome, imaginative and questioning" (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2008, p. 106). Positioning the curriculum as credit accumulation rather than enthusiasm and passion for learning resulted in the participants feeling like they were not individuals with their own needs. By the participant's testimony when they are treated with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, they acknowledge that sometimes their behaviour isn't positive—"I feel very suppressed, and then I just get angry". Respondent 3

Engaging with pedagogies that overlook the diverse gifting's of students suppresses the learning environment leading to disempowerment (Bamber & Moore, 2017; Palmer, 1998). Teachers can alleviate this tension through building communities within their classrooms that reject hostility and instead operate from shalom (Benson, 2018; Spears & Loomis, 2009; Wolterstorff, 2002). Shalom is experienced as universal flourishing and a sense of peace in all relationships between 'God, self, fellows and nature' (Plantinga, 2002; Wolterstorff, 2002). When pedagogies are based on human flourishing, God's Kingdom intention of a peaceful and just society is honoured (Smith & Smith 2011). Furthermore, Benson (2018) extends 'flourishment' beyond peace and justice, to "incorporate delight into one's relationships" (p. 23). One participant's perception, if a teacher is relational, was they felt safe in that environment without fear of conflict:

I definitely think that a good teacher that has a good relationship with students has a bit of banter and a yarn about other things help(s) us do well in that kind of environment...if you get off on the right foot and have the right environment, you're not going to be conflicting with the teacher around stuff like that...In those classes, those teachers are not off-putting or putting you down constantly, they are saying things like "I know you can do it" - even though you don't want too. Just believing in me, even when I don't believe in myself.

Respondent 1

Rapport has a huge bearing on participants' sense of empowerment and flourishing. Participants referred to the "old school" pedagogy which did not meet their needs for relationships, however shared that empowerment occurs when:

Teachers actually connect or know us on a level as a person rather than just a group of students they have to teach ... It's coming back to the personal connection.

Respondent 3

Embodying faith through: Sensitivity to the classroom environment

There is strategic intent to a teacher's practice when they prophetically imagine a space where they welcome the students as guests and consider themselves as hosts (Friere, 1970; Smith & Smith, 2011). Considering this role as host, teachers shape their pedagogy to extend beyond words and become intentional in creating a welcoming 'home' with their actions and dispositions (McLaren, 1995; Smith, 2018). This hospitality addresses the paradox between the teacher and student's experiences within the classroom through creating an intentional space that promotes equality and mutuality (Chinn, 2014; Smith & Smith, 2011; Palmer, 1998). Some authors suggest that viewing education as a space for flourishing invites teachers to consider how their classrooms can be crafted into an environment that is safe for students and teachers to enter each other's life worlds (Norsworthy, 2006; Palmer, 1998; Plantinga, 2002; Smith, 2018). One participant described one environment where they felt safe:

We can all just be ourselves. It's a safe place where I don't have to put up a wall. I feel calm and It's beautiful.

Respondent 3

Another participant described their ideal physical environment to enable best learning:

It is light and airy, not stale or dark. Having music playing is cool—lightens the mood and isn't so serious. If we are doing work, you want to be relaxed not uptight or not feeling comfortable where you are.

Respondent 6

*It's hard to ask for help ... Like you don't want to ask for help after you have just been a di*k to the teacher.*

When the participants felt safe, they felt humanized with potential to contribute and be vulnerable enough to ask questions (Cameron & Swezy, 2015; Cooling et al., 2016).

Participants identified that their flourishing was disrupted by the teacher's lack of awareness of the classroom dynamics which resulted in feelings of suppression.

Some teachers are set in their ways and don't move, they want us to be the same...this is all that is acceptable... as soon as I give my little bit of a flower, its unacceptable and it doesn't fit in. They say, "be a flower" but "be THIS flower!"

This participant described their potential as:

A little baby flower not even open yet... that is what we are capable of, but they (teachers) are not giving us the time to open up... they are stealing it off the tree already... they just leaving us as branches because they want branches they don't want flowers ... all of us has potential, we want to blossom, but any time we blossom somewhere else, that doesn't fit in—the teacher wants to rip it off.

Respondent 4

The participants described their experience of how teachers expected them to fit into a pre-crafted classroom and didn't expect the participants to flourish in their own unique way. This notion speaks to Friere's (1970) critique of the banking approach to education. He describes 'banking' as a form of oppression where teachers view students as containers simply to receive and retain information, valuing memorization rather than "knowledge emerged through invention and reinvention" (Freire, 1970, p. 72).

Discussion

Returning to Smith's (2018) findings, teachers were more likely to "tell" the biblical story, but seldom consider how their pedagogy might serve their educational vision. When this link is not explicit, "it would be hard to claim how much of teaching is Christian" (Smith, 2018, p. 7). This tension disrupts and inhibits a teacher's ability to infuse their teaching and learning with Christian principles (Smith, 2018). The key here is to consider how the inner beliefs and the agency of a teacher's purpose is communicated to students in the classroom because, according to participants in this research; the levels of disempowerment they feel tell a different story.

Teachers with a humble, reflective, self-aware stance can consider their practice and the impact their faith has on their pedagogies (Gibbs,

2006; Palmer, 1998; Smith, 2018; Smith & Smith, 2011). One effective way to survey self is to invite student experience, using their voice to consider if professional practice has been conscripted into something not tangibly biblical. In doing this, teachers are more able to resist the institutional habitus that has informed current practice and shaped education today (Bourdieu, 1990; Tarabini et al., 2017). Discussing the conceptions and misconceptions felt between inner truth and outer performance "intentionally and contextually, puts this knowledge to work" (Beane, 1995, p. 617; See also: Moss 2013; Smith, 2018; Smith & Smith, 2011). Smith (2018) suggests one reason that such professional dialogues have been neglected is because "there is no simple formula for teaching Christianly" (p. 10). However, without considering the impact that pedagogy has on students, Christian education would be as Postman (1997) describes a "mirror of social belief, collecting, amputating and distributing its narratives" (p. 59).

Recommendation: Teachers need to talk less and yarn more

To illustrate the impact of drawing meaning from students' experience, one participant in this study described the process of this project:

It has changed my perspective- thinking that we go into this much detail and seeing how other students think- maybe how we could all work together with other students and teachers and have more conversations?

Respondent 1

This student sat with their school dean and had an open dialogue about their different perceptions of what occurs in the classroom:

I actually had a big heart to heart with a dean on this very conversation. Just about student's vs teacher's perspectives, it was on my mind from doing this. It was so good because I understood where they were coming from, it gave me much more understanding.

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By engaging with moving ongoing dialogues "interspersed with interjections, interpretations, and additions" (Geia et al., 2013, p. 6), teachers can shape their practice by the beliefs they profess. Having these yarns opens the lens through which they perceive embodiment of their faith in the classroom (Blecher, 2006; Postman, 1997). Further, through teaching from the most truthful part of themselves, these teachers can bravely embody to their students the capacity to "discover and explore and inhabit those places in the living of their own lives" (Palmer, 1998, p. 183).

“Having these yarns opens the lens through which they [teachers] perceive embodiment of their faith in the classroom”

Conclusion

Smith (2018) notes with concern that scholarship focused on Christian education typically does not invite student voice into the research design. Shaped by Roger's (2017) methodology Photoyarn, this article reveals the deep impact pedagogical decisions have on students and their desire to be seen and treated as relational people. The revelations from analysis regarding disempowerment and empowerment as experienced by students can be understood as unearthing the 'diamonds' within the soil of the participants' experience. The findings inform powerful conclusions for teachers seeking to embody their faith in their practice. Considering the gap between the espoused and the experienced, teachers need to be committed to finding pedagogies that enable the Christian story to be embodied. The crippling inactivity that can sometimes shape a teacher's practice can be alleviated when they consider that they are not alone in what might seem a lofty pursuit. God's "divine spirit is always blowing, it is the sails of human listening that may or may not be raised" (Moran, 1997, p. 13). **TEACH**

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