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Teachers' Understanding of Imago Dei

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Abstract

Often education is viewed pragmatically as that of preparing students for life as employees. Another view is that education is about enabling human beings to flourish. The pragmatic and flourishing paradox has consequences for national citizenship. For Christian teachers, critical to such an approach would be the manner in which their teaching practice is informed and shaped by a Christian worldview. Such shaping involves an applied knowledge with reference to understanding people, and particularly students as "Imago Dei." This research presents a pilot study in which 120 teachers in Christian schools in New Zealand and Canada were invited, via an online survey, to respond to three questions on what it means to be made in the image of God, and how that understanding informed their practice. In appropriating the work of Dorothy Smith (2005) on the significance of "voices in the everyday" within a profession, coupled with Charteris's (2014) "epistemological shudders," the research engages in a discourse analysis for probing unquestioned assumptions which open up possibilities for meaning-making and, consequently, increased intentionality of practice. Following grounded methodology, the literature review was not undertaken until after the data analysis. Discussion explores the degree of fit with approaches to Imago Dei found in the literature. Data analysis identifies four approaches to participants' meaning making of Imago Dei. Preliminary findings suggest that how teachers understand Imago Dei does make a difference to how they view themselves as teacher, view students as image bearers, and craft their teaching.

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Abstract

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Introduction

The degree to which one’s teaching is influenced by one’s worldview assumptions is of particular interest to those charged with the task of equipping Christian teachers. As Christian educators with over 30 years experience who are currently involved in initial teacher education informed by a Christian

worldview lens, the researchers for this study have read and spoken on the importance of viewing persons as image bearers of God. While contemplating the role of Christian education in the 21st century and engagement with aspects of the biblical narrative relating to purpose and involvement with everyday life and living, we found ourselves inquiring as to whether students could “take seriously again their royal-priestly vocation in God’s world” (Middleton, 1994, p. 21). We found ourselves wondering if there was a relationship between this idea from Middleton and students’ understanding of Imago Dei. We began to hypothesize that one’s understanding of Imago Dei is ultimately reflective of one’s understanding of the nature, character, purposes and priorities of God (Grenz, 2001; Hoekema, 1986; Middleton, 1994). It makes sense to us that one’s view of God could also be the focus for understanding humans as Imago Dei. This would mean that a limited or small view of God could result in a limited or small view of humans and their role as participants in God’s redemptive story. This research seeks to test this hypothesis with the idea that should it hold true, then curriculum *intentionality* could benefit from development of a more expansive understanding of who God is as a basis for understanding human nature, the image of God, purpose, and therefore the role of education.

In the light of this deliberation, we are particularly interested to identify how those who teach in Christian schools might respond to such foundational questions as: Does understanding personal worldview ontology and knowing one’s purpose in a relationship with God become evident in “faith-full” teaching? How does cognitive knowledge of worldview and scripture translate into how teachers see themselves, students, and what it means to teach? The decision was made to explore how teachers’ understandings of Imago Dei—what it means to be made in the image of God—influence how teachers see themselves and their students, and how this understanding intentionally shapes daily

professional practice within the context of a Christian school.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The idea of humans as Imago Dei might be a “taken for granted” assumption within the Christian community. It is common for Christians to relate being made in “the image of God” with ideas such as sacredness of life, respect, value and dignity (Hodge & Wolfer, 2008; Klassen, 2004; Stenmark, 2012). “Even the very idea of human rights came out of Christian teaching on the image of God” (Keller, 2012, p. 223). Our understanding of Imago Dei is foundational for Christian anthropology (Klassen, 2004; Sands, 2010; Stenmark, 2012) and consequently for our educability (Anderson, 2013). However, the aspect of being human is much more than this. A robust, biblically grounded understanding has the potential to influence Christian education through increased intentionality related to role and purpose.

Common to the different models that exist to understand Imago Dei is the understanding that humans are the way they are because God is the way He is. Different models reflect different theologies and time frames. However, two models in particular are well established in the literature. Typically, these are described as structural (or substantialist) and functional (or relational representation). The structural approach tends to focus on “attributes or capacities that are intrinsic to the human being” (Case-Winters, 2004, p. 814). Humans are “stamped” with attributes such as reason, self-consciousness, moral sense, self-transcendence and as such *resemble* God. The functional approach focuses on how humans *act* as they *mirror* Him, or *represent* God in their actions (Hoekema, 1986).

Some authors are critical of reliance on these two models, and have moved from an emphasis on the metaphysical, substantialist analogy or even a character-based (i.e., kind, loving) view (e.g., Middleton, 1994; Smith, 2009; Sands, 2010; Crouch, 2013; Anderson, 2014). A more holistic, integrative, and interdisciplinary approach is sought (Anderson, 2014; Middleton, 2005; Sands, 2010; Welz, 2011). These writings include the suggestion that our image bearing also has a collaborative component – we reveal the nature of God together and consequently seek opportunities to work in communities where diversity is welcomed and

embraced (e.g., Grenz, 2001; Sands, 2010). Another strong theme is that our ability to be the Imago Dei in this fallen world is dependent on the redemptive work of Christ and our taking up of the invitation to imitate Him or become like Him (Ream & Glanzer, 2013). Three other aspects of these more recent writings that have substantial implications for Christian education at the school and higher education context are now highlighted.

First, while not so much a fault of the content of the two established models as the way they have been applied, the tendency has become to focus on the self, or the characteristics of “ways of being” without keeping He who created and He who is the Image in mind (Anderson, 2014; Wright, 2014; Welz, 2011). More recent writing endeavors to highlight our “ontological dependence” on the Creator, God suggests we are “a being in conversation” with our Creator (Welz, 2011, p. 81). Anderson (2014) suggested, we “have tried to answer *how* identity manifests itself without first answering where identity comes from” (p. 23). Education therefore becomes a journey with God, for God and through God “...properly done, it attaches us to God” (Plantinga, 2002, p. xi). Related to these ideas, and reading (in some cases re-reading) work by authors such as Brueggemann (1982, 1993), Smith (2009, 2013), Plantinga (2002), Middleton (1994, 2005), Wright (1996), Keller (2012) and Grenz (2001), aligns with Freire’s (1970) idea of education as “humanizing,” i.e., becoming all God wanted us to be as humans in relationship with Him. “In a word education is about finding identity as image bearers” (Anderson, 2014, p. 96).

Second, Jamie Smith’s (2009) work (e.g. *Desiring the Kingdom*) challenged the long held primacy of image bearing related to reason and rationality (e.g. “I think therefore I am,” Descartes) by suggesting that at their innermost human beings are *lovers* – as is God. He claims “to be human is to love and it is what we love that defines who we are” (Smith, 2009, p. 51). This has echoes of Thomas Merton who wrote, “To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love” (in Dekar, 2012, p. 73; also see 1 John 4:8). However, this is not a love bereft of reason – they are inextricably bound together. Education, therefore becomes “the process of learning to love the right things, of learning to

love what God loves so we can reflect what He is and what He does” (Anderson, 2014, p. 97; see also Psalm 78; Jeremiah 9). Without knowing God and His priorities and patterns, no one can intentionally represent Him. New Testament teaching points to human morality – the capacity to sense morality (structural) and the choice to do morally (functional) — can only be properly integrated when we are in a renewed, informed relationship with God. An education that develops students’ abilities to create culture must simultaneously reference God’s loves, priorities, and patterns and invite such culture making “in light of God’s overarching story for humanity and creation and the limits expressed about creation’s use” (Ream & Glanzer, 2013, p. 33).

Third, several attempts have been made to develop a more “dynamic, relational notion” (Middleton, 1994, p. 9) of Imago Dei that celebrates the best of the two established models but without separating our being and doing. The Genesis account does not give much detail about the components or capacities of the image as much as what is to be done because of who the image is. As noted above, it would seem obvious that our understanding of person as image bearer is dependent on one’s understanding of the *other* – the One to be represented. It appears that often the worker/ruler aspect of God is underplayed when one thinks about humans as Imago Dei. Not only does our understanding of Imago Dei inform and shape our view of persons, it also “...*defines the purpose of humans both now and in the world to come*. . . . (Klassen, 2004, para 1). Middleton (2005) suggested that the mirror that is traditionally used as a metaphor to aid our understanding of Imago Dei is too one-dimensional and that the prism may be more helpful. Middleton wrote:

Humanity ...that not only interacts thoroughly with the history of interpretation, but which integrates insightfully the unique deity of Jesus as Lord and the call to imitate him, in God’s image—and the church as the renewed Imago Dei—is called and empowered to be God’s multi-sided prism in the world, reflecting and refracting the Creator’s brilliant light into a rainbow of cultural activity and socio-political patterns that scintillates with the glory of God’s presence and manifests his reign of justice. (p. 25)

A helpful approach suggests Imago Dei is best understood as “vocation or divine call where humans image God as they fulfill their royal vocation to mediate God’s rule in earth” (Sands, 2010, p. 38). In other words, our stewardship of creation and culture-making is “the consequence of being created as God’s image, not the content of this motif itself” (Welz, 2011, p. 78). In this way, the themes of the Creation Mandate join together with the redemptive work of Christ. The emphasis on putting off the old humanity and putting on the new humanity as found in the New Testament is essential for being a proper representative of God.

It seems to us that this insight fits well with humans being called to “faithful improvisation” within an understanding of the Bible as a narrative (Wright, 1996). Bartholomew and Goheen (2004) presented an understanding that Scripture is a living drama in which we understand who we are as we interact with God in the present tense of our time, while considering past and future contexts. Wolters (1995/2005) emphasized that we are rulers over creation within a structure and direction, allowing us to move closer to or farther away from God. All of the above note a view of ontology as being central to our understanding of self and God.

Exploration of these views suggests ways the metaphors of persons as rulers and lovers, as faithful improvisers within their service to the world, might influence Christian educational endeavors. We acknowledge that each of these metaphors has challenging aspects which need to be addressed (e.g., the notion of rulership can result in an abuse of power as noted in Crouch (2013), or the restriction to masculine images (Anderson, 2014).

What ties together this trajectory from Genesis 1 to the New Testament is the consistent biblical insight that humanity from the beginning is both gifted by God with a servant ambassadorial status and dignity, and called by God actively to represent His kingdom in the entire range of human life, that is, in the very way we interact with and subdue the earth. Freire’s (1970) view that critical education does not fit people into reality but provokes them to deal with their reality critically and creatively as expressions of human flourishing, is the reason why he calls such education *prophetic*. According to Middleton:

The theological significance, therefore, of the royal interpretation of the Imago Dei has remained largely unexplored. The time is ripe, then, for extended theological reflection on the image of God that takes seriously both the biblical materials and contemporary biblical scholarship. (1994, p. 13)

The Study

A qualitative approach to the research was chosen because the focus for the study is on concepts such as understanding, meaning, and action rather than causal determination or prediction (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Patton, 1990; Williams, 2003). This study seeks to gain insight into the way participants understand and work with the concept of humans as Imago Dei.

Our participants emerged voluntarily in response to an invitation for research participation. Ethical approval was gained from both researchers' institutions. The completion of an online Google form indicated consent and provided anonymity for respondents, as it was returned to a research assistant rather than directly to the researchers. Within the Google form, three open questions were posed for response:

1. When thinking about humans in general, what does the phrase "made in the image of God" mean to you?
2. When thinking about your students in particular, what is particularly meaningful to you?
3. How do these understandings influence, inform, or shape your everyday teaching practice?

In appropriating the work of Dorothy Smith (2002) on the significance of *voices in the everyday* within a profession, it is important to identify the reason and significance of listening to the voices in light of our profession:

In contrast to other sociologies, it [institutional ethnography] does not take its problems or questions from one or other variant of sociological discourse – symbolic interaction, Marxism, ethnomethodology or other "school" of sociological thinking and research...the central project is one of inquiry which begins with the issues and problems of

people's lives and develops inquiry from the standpoint of their experience in and of the actualities of their everyday living. (p. 18)

In the above study, Smith cautioned researchers regarding the inadequacy of some sociological approaches that involve jumping to broad statements about the way the world operates, thereby extinguishing or at best de-emphasizing the particular experiences of individuals and social groups within particular institutional settings (Smith, 2005). Her research showed that it is problematic to talk about research as a simple method or set of methods whose findings can be applied mechanically across different contexts and studies. In response to these concerns, we have sought to document and analyze the ways in which narrative stories are responsive to the social, institutional, and personal nuances of participants and how these become differently enacted, understood, and interpreted. We believe that treating the understanding of Imago Dei as a static sociological construct or model (or indeed a set of rules) for institutional life is not in itself sufficient, as it overlooks the dynamic and relational dialogue within the institutional community (Smith, 2005).

In New Zealand, respondents (n=90) taught within member schools of the New Zealand Association for Christian Schools (NZACS). In Canada, respondents (n=30) emerged from *Edifide*, an association for members of Christian Schools in Ontario. The variance in numbers may be explained from the fact that New Zealand participants were drawn from a national pool of Christian teachers (approximately 60 schools) while Canadian responses were invited from a provincial pool of about 70 Christian teachers associated with *Edifide*. Participant responses, identified only by an allocated number (e.g., P23 represents the 23rd response registered with the research assistant), were read and re-read in preparation for analysis that followed "...the qualitative technique involving codification, classification and thematisation" (Bouma, 2000, p. 186). Within the coding process, researchers sought to honor the individual voices of the everyday as noted by Smith (2005). After all of the questions were examined individually, codes were once again considered for consistency across all three questions. Once codes had been allocated to represent the data, they were considered in terms of categories. Next, the data were reconsidered to

check for consistency with the final categories. Then, key words assisted in finding key themes and perceptions after being examined across the other two questions for consistency, with attention to Charteris's conception of epistemological shudders (2014). Epistemological shudders are a means of making meaning across questions, within them and in looking for assumptions raised. Implementing the work of Charteris (2014) on epistemological shudders opens up possibilities for meaning making within a content analysis regarding how teachers understand and own the principles of what it means to be made in the image of God, Imago Dei. In this process, four approaches regarding how participants describe their understanding of Imago Dei were identified. We also had a grouping of unique responses, which did not fit any of those four approaches, but neither did they have a common theme to group them as an approach.

In this paper, we consider the findings primarily as they align with or are representative of the two more common interpretations of Imago Dei as being structural (substantialist) or functional (relational representative), as outlined in the literature.

Findings

Each of the three questions is explored separately in terms of what Imago Dei means to participants at the personal level, a more general level, and then their perceived implications for practice. Within the analysis phase, once tentative approaches were identified regarding a personal expression of Imago Dei in the first question asked, the data was then re-read in light of existing literature to identify specific key words and structural and formal implications that would align or veer away from a scripturally founded view of Imago Dei.

The analysis process has revealed a multifaceted understanding of what Imago Dei means to participants. The themes emerging from the data analysis process show four understandings of how respondents appear to have understood "being made in the image of God" and the implications these understandings have for teaching, learning and relating. Direct quotes from the original data are referenced to each participant's code (e.g., P23).

A Facet Approach. The largest percentage of the 120 participants, at 48% (n=57) presented what the researchers termed a *facet approach* to understanding Imago Dei. In this approach, humans

are understood to have facets or characteristics that are associated with the nature and character of God. Such facets include being unique, having creativity, humor, love, and the ability to be able to reason and think. Participant 32 represented this group in stating "that every person, in some way, reflects a facet of God" or, "that each of us holds a characteristic of who God is." What is interesting is that for the most part these facets are held in the same way as one might wear a cloak or carry a package. P18 was representative of this view, by indicating that humans "bear his image, his characteristics for creativity, emotions and the ability to make choices." At the same time, some participants indicated that people are made with "inherent attributes of God" (P4) that are "stamped in our own physical and spiritual DNA" (P55). It is within this approach that common language about people as "higher than animals" or having "a higher place in creation" is found. Typically, this sense of superiority is linked to rationality, decision-making, and communication abilities. This understanding of personhood appears to be individually centered, even though each may show a small portion of who God is. Interestingly, these responses exhibit what might be called a stationary stance, requiring no consequential action – except possibly to treat each other with respect. It is also within this approach that a segmented, rather than holistic, understanding is evident. For some participants, the segments may be "mind, soul, and spirit" (P63). For others it might be "attributes of God to different levels and degrees" (P69); "thoughts, actions and spirit" (P73) or, "gifts, talents and supernatural power" or "soul, mind, will and emotion" (P77). It appears that these understandings would fit most comfortably into a structural [substantialist] frame of reference in understanding Imago Dei.

The influence of understandings such as these regarding the teacher and teaching is typically one of "showing respect and consideration to ALL my students" and "prayerfully asking God to show me His heart for my students" (P75). Teachers in this grouping refer to "paying attention" to the identified facets, but it is unclear from the data if this leads to any specific actions. The exception to this is in reference to students being treated with respect (as noted above) and as being creative, something that makes "me want to nurture their creative and spiritual parts to help them grow to their greatest potential" (P28). In terms of curriculum foci, it

appears that the component view of the image translates into a component view of teaching: “to teach them to look after their bodies and minds in what they take in and how it affects them. Encourage them to grow in the spiritual aspect also” (P76). For P55, the influence on his/her everyday teaching practice was to remind pupils of “the fact that we are made to be in relationship, that we have intelligence and a conscience.”

A Purpose Driven Approach. The second largest grouping of participants (21%, n=25) represent what the researchers termed a *purpose driven* approach to understanding Imago Dei. This approach identifies that image bearing is best understood in terms of a purpose – whether that purpose be to glorify God, serve God, or further His kingdom. Rather than as in the facet approach where image bearing was somewhat external, for those in this approach, God’s “attributes and characteristics are intricately woven into our beings” (P39). P52 and P20 noted that people do what God does: “We are made to be like Him and to operate like Him and to reflect and glorify Him” (P52) and “we are made for the purpose of bringing glory to God” (P20). Within this approach, one’s gifts and talents are recognized as “God-given and for God’s purposes” (P113). It is this purpose that brings human beings “meaning and joy in life” (P57). People are not positioned as robots but rather as relational and dependent decision-makers. Consequently, classroom approaches “use discipline that redeems rather than punishes” (P52). This approach still fits into the structural [substantialist] framework in that it could easily identify the understanding without it apparently influencing specific teaching practices. For example, P52, quoted above, noted that understanding influenced his/her everyday teaching practice in that “It is pivotal. I teach because of the kids, not because of my subject. My subject is just a vehicle.” Such a response might be compared to influences representative of the fourth approach where the teacher is committed to “consistently remind them that man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart” (P59). This comparison can be seen in addressing topics such as “bullying, belonging to our class, our responsibilities to each other as a team, the ways we should talk to each other, forgiveness, inclusions in games and friendship circles...” (P59).

An Ambassadorial Approach. The key purpose identified for those in the third approach (15%, n=18) can be understood through two different ways of being an ambassador for God: to show who God is, and to serve God. By far the most common expression was represented by P16’s comment to “live a life that shows others who God is.” This view, therefore, is that people “mirror him and reflect him in what we say and do” (P23). The second most common expression suggests that our image bearing is demonstrated when we serve God. For example, the sense of being an ambassador – relationship, reflection and dependence is evident in P72’s words: “To be made in His image means we need to look to Him to see who we are, just as a mirror image does not exist without a source.” Similarly, another participant (P79) commented that humans represent God through actions and ways of being. In the following extensive quote from Participant 87, both the idea of purpose and facet are present but the focus for these is found in this ambassadorial role – to point to Who God is. For this participant, this meant that being

made in the image of God is both our identity and our purpose. We are to understand that we are uniquely placed both to possess and to display Godly characteristics...As such the human condition is designed so that different interactions and relationships we experience can serve as bread-crumbs, leading us demonstratively toward various facets of character that ultimately help answer the question “What is God like?”

As mentioned previously, the ambassadorial role involves both representation and service. The service component is clear for participant 43 who wrote:

We are called to serve God in every inch of Creation. We differ from the animals and are called upon to care for the earth, including plants, animals and the world around us. We are called to live a life of service, created to work and be productive, to serve the Creator as stewards of creation.

Within this approach, curriculum subjects are vehicles for children to learn to live their purpose rather than content “to be delivered” (P66). More than 30% of participants positioned the teacher as

model, one in whom the character of God emanates and who finds the model for 'being teacher' within the relationship they have with God. For example, Participant 87 stated, "What kind of teacher would I like God to be with me?" The answer to that question directly impacts teaching, from lesson presentation to administration of correctional techniques." In this sense we came to realize that the teacher is being God's ambassador to the students. This approach tends to reflect more of a functional (relational representative) view.

A Consequential Approach. Those participants (11%, n=13) in the fourth approach presented responses that are termed by researchers as a *long-term consequential legacy* approach that did not separate sacred and secular; life and work. This approach to understanding Imago Dei includes the sense of a past, present, and future context of reflection, and considers cultural implications of questions and engagement of faith. It might be easy to suggest that such an approach might unify into a coherent story to be lived, rather than a fragment of its parts or characteristics to be emulated. Though smaller in number, participants represented within this theme appeared to view worldview and relationship as a living lifestyle from which to engage culture and flourishing. For example, P108 noted the teaching role is "helping them [students] fulfill God's purpose in their lives; helping them to come to know God by showing how my subjects (Science and Physics) show the order of God's creation and hence the character of God Himself." Within this approach, it appears that faith is a way of *leaning into life* (Fernhout, 1997), not a separate part of life. The words from P102 are indicative of this when they note,

Hugely rewarding aspects of teaching are to provide an environment where students can think, grow, be challenged and become more confident in who they are in God; become more skilled in various area so that they are equipped to fulfill His plans and purposes for their lives.

Participants within this approach appear to be prayerfully focused on the outcomes of their decisions and choices in ways that are not simplistic, or black and white; but in ways that were life-giving, honest, and influential within a period of time and place.

Within this category, some responses present what the researchers term a cause and effect approach to understanding Imago Dei. This approach, like the facet approach, identifies some of God's characteristics (e.g., enabling, responsibility, and caring about justice) but differs in that these characteristics cause an effect (or consequence) in our lives—allowing action as enablers, being responsible, and being justice-seekers. For example, since God is a steward, I am responsible to engage in stewardship of the natural world, within a greater plan for the cosmos. Within this group of participants there is a strong recognition of the relationship between what it means to be an image bearer and the role of the teacher. For example, P9 notes that image bearers "uniquely mirror God's characteristics such as his creativity, his passion, his reasonableness and rationality, his appreciation of justice and mercy" and because of that teachers "need to help them [students] to appreciate and develop these characteristics (creativity, passion, rationality, etc.)" (P9). Similarly, as God is servant, creator, sustainer—then we engage our students to become 'servant-workers,' justice-seekers, community-builders" and "they do all this because God is the creator and every square inch [of life on earth] needs to be fixed. God is restoring His creation and we can help" (P24). This comment is indicative of the teachers' level of reflection with forethought to planned action.

This approach may lead to involvement in areas such as justice, compassion, and care and is evident within responses that report issues or areas understood in terms of social responsibility. Injustice provoked a stand in some way—be it in discourse or in action. For example, since "We are made to be like Him, purposeful," the teacher's role is to "try and help them [students] carry out their God-given purpose in life or help them use their gifts and abilities" (P41). Similarly, P59 noted that image bearing meant that God had "given each of us strengths to be used for his glory" and consequently, as teacher, "I need to affirm who they are, their talents and uniqueness as designed by God." Teachers often describe or position themselves as shepherds, or nurturers who were charged with helping students find and understand the implications of an identity as image bearers, to flourish, particularly in terms of "who they are in God" (P102). P9 noted, "...at the very least, we need to regard our various classes and disciplines as

opportunities to grow in this identity.” For participants in this approach there is clearly both responsibility and privilege for particular outcomes because of our image bearing nature. This approach also appears to be reflective of a functional view of Imago Dei.

A Common Commitment. Woven throughout the different approaches is clear recognition by the majority of participants that as image bearers, people are to be valued. For some, this point was stated with no apparent following actions or consequences. For others, particularly in Approaches 3 and 4, this valuing did not stop at this point but was a motivation for teachers to ensure that their teaching practices were those in which students become honored, respected and cherished. For one participant, this means that as an image bearer “my self-talk should be one of encouragement. I need to respect and honor myself as well” (P24).

Sometimes a similar view of the Imago Dei led to different responses. For example, one participant in this group focuses on “the special self-awareness that so clearly separates us from even the most ‘intelligent’ animals” – leading to an emphasis in teaching to a more disciplined life; to “think before we respond” (P68) whereas for another participant student, discipline is to be characterized by “grace and restorative relationships” (P8).

Finally, within the data some responses (5%, n=6) were categorized as unique as the ideas were not present in other responses and they did not fit easily into other categories. In one instance, the focus was on the participant’s journey with the idea of Imago Dei, rather than what he understood from the term. The following two examples demonstrate this point. One participant posits that image bearing occurs at birth and is influenced by the type of relationship we have with God (P83). Participant 117 reported, “The more I have thought about it over the years, the more limiting I find it,” or that “I do not really know” (P120). Another participant commented, “It is more helpful to look at the main message of the Bible – the fall of man and God’s ongoing work of salvation and redemption,” might be understood as a gentle provocation to the researchers in terms of the focus of the study. One response categorized as unique did not accept that people were made in God’s image, but rather as an “imagination” (P64), while another noted that “we are part of him” (P70).

Conclusion

A common theme throughout the data was that the teacher’s role is to ‘help the students fulfill their task to be image bearers.’ In the words of P51, “It changes everything when you view people and your pupils through this lens.” Within this pilot study, there are multiple approaches to understanding the nature of one’s image bearing. A key finding is that a teachers’ understanding of Imago Dei does in fact “make all the difference” to the way they understand classroom management, discipline, teaching role, students’ learning role, pedagogical choices and, most importantly, the purpose for teaching. More importantly, this study suggests limiting the understanding of Imago Dei as structural and/or functional, is in need of further exploration. It is in itself, insufficient. Teachers’ understanding of Imago Dei requires the framework of a living narrative, an understanding of Imago Dei that is holistic and beyond mere reason. This can be apparent to the researcher in consideration of Charteris’s (2014) “epistemological shudders” where considering discourse analysis takes seriously the view of unquestioned assumptions. The work of Middleton (1994, 2005) and others mentioned in the literature review provide valuable content to the conversation of Imago Dei in considering how people made in God’s image can flourish. Sands’ (2010) suggestion that Imago Dei is better understood as a vocation provides potential to bring both structural and functional understandings together in a manner that is more holistic and the researchers are keen to pursue this possibility in the next phase of the study.

This pilot study indicates that listening to what Smith (2002, 2005) would term “voices of the everyday” fills a gap as we endeavor to understand Christian teachers’ perceptions and embodiment of Imago Dei in the task of teaching. We express our gratitude to those whose willingness to participate in this pilot study enabled us to gain these insights which will be stewarded with care. Also, we are grateful to Redeemer University College for the internal research grant that enabled this collaboration. Continued research into how Imago Dei becomes evident in teaching and learning is an area of fertile ground for Christian schooling and higher education, and additionally, for social well being and human flourishing.

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