

2015

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Recommended Citation

Key, Scott (2015) "The Good Shepherd: Lessons for Teacher Education," *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/icctej/vol10/iss2/5>

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The ICCTE Journal

A Journal of the International Christian Community for Teacher Education

The Good Shepherd: Lessons for Teacher Education

Scott Key, The King's University

Abstract

Across the continent, the demand for increased student achievement dominates conversation. Teacher education programs are under pressure to ensure that pre-service teachers are able to step into classrooms and improve student achievement. This pressure can invite programs to focus on subject-specific and pedagogical competencies while minimizing ethical and relational aspects of teacher preparation. Yet caring relationships are central to more positive learning experiences. What should these relationships look like? For Christian teachers and teacher educators, the answer to this question lays, in part, in an examination of Jesus. This paper focuses on Jesus the Good Shepherd as seen in the Gospels. What can teachers learn from Jesus? How do these lessons impact teacher education programs?

Introduction

Education is a focus for politicians and parents alike. Across the continent, the demand for improved student achievement to increase competitiveness in the knowledge economy dominates conversation. This demand is often linked to standardization in teaching and assessment. Teacher education programs are expected to ensure that pre-service teachers step into classrooms ready to take charge of student learning. This pressure can lead programs to focus on subject-specific and pedagogical competencies while minimizing ethical and relational aspects of teacher preparation (Cummings, Dyas, Maddux & Kochman, 2001; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011). It seems obvious that teachers need to know the academic content and how to teach kids (Academic Achievement, 2003; Commission of the European Communities, 2007), but a focus on relationships can and does improve student achievement.

To learn, one must be engaged. The choice to engage is a decision made from emotions and reason (Sousa, 2005). To be engaged, one must feel good about the learning situation. This feeling, in

part, is based on relationships. Bandura (1992, 2001), Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), Erikson (1980) and Maslow (1970) developed theories suggesting that healthy, caring relationships are essential for human growth and development. Students need healthy, caring relationships with parents (Woolfolk Hoy & Perry, 2012), peers (Rubin, Coplan, Chan, Buskirk & Wojslawowicz, 2005; Ryan, 2001), and teachers (Davis, 2003; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Regardless of ethnicity and gender, students want teachers who care (Alder, 2002; De Jesus & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Garrett, Barr & Rothman, 2009; Garza, Ovando & Seymour, 2010; Perez, 2000; Teven, 2001). When combined with subject matter and pedagogical competence, caring relationships between students and teachers foster student engagement and motivation (Stipek, 2006; Wentzel, 1997), which leads to better learning and improved student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000b; Ladd, 2008; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Stronge, 2007).

Students want to be cared for and this care is best experienced through student-teacher relationships (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Davis, 2003; Goldstein, 1999; Lyman, 2000; Muller, 2001; Pianta, 1999). Students appreciate teachers who show patience, empathy, and respect as they listen and respond in helpful ways (Bosworth, 1995; Cothran, Kulina & Garrahy, 2003; Murphy, Delli & Edwards, 2004). Teachers demonstrate caring traits by fostering a sense of belonging, engaging in open communication that challenges and encourages, connecting with students on an emotional level, providing interesting and engaging material, and supporting academic success (Garza, Alejandro, Blythe & Fite, 2014; Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Rogers & Webb, 1991). These actions build up trust and solidify relationships. While teachers do these things in various ways, caring is closely tied to quality teaching and improves student learning.

Although the pressure to focus on content and pedagogy is heavy, successful teacher education programs balance content and pedagogy with dispositions of care. This is not as easy as it sounds. Many pre-service teachers enter their preparation programs full of confidence in their ability to care for their students (Weinstein, 1998) and see caring as an instinctive or natural trait similar to mothering (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003; James, 2010). The good news is that many pre-service teachers leave their programs understanding that caring is something that can be learned (Goldstein & Lake, 2000) and practiced. While they come to understand that caring is an important part of student-teacher relationships, some pre-service teachers struggle with conceptualizing and enacting their caring role (Kemp & Reupert, 2012).

As programs explore how to infuse caring into the organizational elements of their program and into their curriculum, a crucial element is modeling done by faculty. Caring teacher education resides in the relationship between the professor and the students (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003). These relationships are complex. They are influenced by expectations and beliefs of student and professor and by the interpretations of each other's words and deeds. Trust and time are key elements. The caring relationships between professors and students impact understanding of self and engagement in learning. While pre-service teachers can learn to care for students, they need "to go beyond simply following previous beliefs or personal tendencies" (Kim & Schallert, 2011, p. 1066) to be challenged to meet an ethical ideal.

For teachers who identify as followers of Jesus, this call to focus on the relational aspects of teaching seems obvious. Relationship has been central from the very beginning. We are called to be in good relationship with God and others. In fact, Jesus tells us, "You shall love the Lord your God [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39, New Revised Standard Version). So, what does Jesus have to say about the student-teacher relationship? What are the implications for Christian teacher education programs?

Lessons from the Good Shepherd

Jesus, like a precious gemstone, is multi-faceted. This paper will explore one facet—the Good Shepherd as found in the Gospels—to determine what Jesus has to say about student-teacher

relationships and the implications for Christian teacher education programs.

The metaphor of shepherd is found in the ancient near east tradition, the Greco-Roman tradition, and the Biblical tradition (Hedrick, 2007). The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke connect back to the Old Testament tradition of the royal and righteous shepherd king found in II Samuel, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Micah (Blomberg, 2007; Hedrick, 2007; Pao & Schmabel, 2007; Watts, 2007). The Gospels explore the character of Jesus as the shepherd king—compassionate, merciful, righteous judge, and loving (protects and cares for his flock with his life)—to help the Gospels' audiences better understand Jesus.

The clearest view of the Good Shepherd comes from the Gospel of John where Jesus used figurative speech to describe himself as the Good Shepherd and linked back to the Old Testament tradition (Kostenberger, 2002; Wright IV, 2012). Psalm 23 provides a detailed description of the Lord as Shepherd. The shepherd is focused on the wellbeing of the sheep: the shepherd provides food, water, and protection for the sheep; he knows the best places to rest; and the sheep feel safe and secure (Keller, 1970). Both Ezekiel and Zechariah build on this early foundation to show the shepherd as one who gathers, cares for, and protects the sheep (France, 1992; Kostenberger, 2007). While these aspects of the shepherd motif appear in the Gospel, John resisted grounding Jesus' words in specific historical moments in order to allow the words to connect with the hearers and readers of the Gospel (Black Johnson, 2001; Kysar, 1991). Thus, in order to connect with the images portrayed in the Gospels, the audience needs to situate themselves within the Gospels' narrative world in order to grasp meaning (Kysar, 1991; Wright IV, 2012).

When Jesus chose to identify himself as the Good Shepherd, he picked an image that was immediately familiar to his audience. Shepherds are one of the oldest occupations dating from 9000 B.C.E. Over time, shepherds moved from a nomadic way of life to becoming an important part of the village. This was true in the first century C.E. in Palestine and is true today. Few become wealthy, but it is honorable work.

The shepherd is responsible for vulnerable, sometimes unpredictable, and often infuriating

creatures dependent upon his skill for care and protection. He uses the right tools to guide the sheep on appropriate paths to the best pastures and water supplies. The shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. He never demands too much, but understands how far the sheep can go before they need rest and refreshing. The shepherd goes before the flock, within the flock, and behind the flock. His position changes as the circumstances dictate. The shepherd is vigilant, fearless, and patient. He is aware of where the sheep are and what dangers lay ahead. If necessary, the shepherd will spend hours combing the countryside to find a stray or put himself at risk to protect his flock. The shepherd's actions are based on a close, intimate relationship where the sheep recognize the voice/the person whom they trust. The shepherd is dedicated to the wellbeing of the sheep (Borowski, 1998; Hopkins, 1993; Matthews & Benjamin, 2005; Page II & Volz, 1993).

The parallels between a regular Palestinian shepherd and Jesus as the Good Shepherd are many. The Good Shepherd has a close, intimate relationship with his followers. He knows each follower by name (John 10.3). This is not simply knowledge about another. Rather, there is a deep relationship between him and his followers where they recognize and respond only to his voice as he leads them (John 10.3-4). The world is a dangerous place so, like sheep, Jesus' followers trust their guide to care for and protect them. While some will obey and others will stray, the Good Shepherd loves and cares for all. He goes out to find those who are lost and examines each to see if there is any injury that needs healing. Jesus is the door or gate who protects against thieves and robbers who are false teachers (John 10.8). The sheep have freedom to live their abundant lives in his presence (John 10.9-10). The wellbeing of his followers is his primary concern. In fact, Jesus is willing to lay down his life because he loves his followers (John 10.11-14).

Clearly, Jesus fits the image of shepherd, but he is much more, he is the Good Shepherd. What does this mean for teachers? What does this mean for teacher education programs?

Teachers as Shepherds

There are many ways to interpret and apply the Good Shepherd metaphor to the classroom. It is possible to conclude that the teacher is at the head of the class leading the students to the knowledge

deemed necessary by those in authority (based on John 10.3-4). Good relationships with students are necessary in order for the students to follow their teacher, who knows the way and has their best interests in mind. While this "transmissional" interpretation is plausible, a deeper understanding of the life of the shepherd leads to a deeper interpretation and application for classroom teachers.

Good teachers are dedicated to their students. They care, nurture, and protect students. Good teachers know the students and understand where each student is physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. They do not force or drive students nor leave students on their own. Instead, they understand how far the students can go before they need rest and refreshing and what students need to continue the learning journey. Good teachers are watchful, vigilant. They are aware of where both opportunities and dangers reside and respond quickly and effectively to any obstructions or obstacles. Good teachers are skillful and well prepared through excellent teacher preparation and continued professional development with all the necessary tools to utilize multi-modal strategies that allow all students to learn and demonstrate their learning. Good teachers allow for individual variation within the context of a learning community, which may require navigating different paths to the same destination. To accomplish this, good teachers may be in front, within, or behind students as their position changes based on circumstances. In sum, the actions of good teachers are based on close relationships with students focused on the wellbeing and learning of all students.

Good teachers can be shepherds. Yes, Jesus is God and thus, infallible, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent and human beings have none of these attributes. Yet, the Good Shepherd offers some helpful insights. Good teachers have close, intimate relationships with students thereby allowing the teacher to make good, professional decisions to ensure that all students learn. Good teachers understand the boundaries, communicate these boundaries to students, and allow students, within the boundaries, to take a number of paths. This requires teachers to be flexible about paths to take and, perhaps even, the destination. The students take some initiative. Sometimes the students may

take the same path. At other times, the students may take different paths. Good teachers are confident in their abilities to assist students when necessary, but comfortable enough to let students take their paths. Teachers only intervene or redirect the students if they are moving outside the boundaries. This is what caring looks like from the vantage point of the Good Shepherd.

Not surprisingly, the lessons of the Good Shepherd fit with current research. Teachers have the most direct influence on student learning (Ladd, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Stronge, 2010) and effective teaching is directly linked to increased student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000b; Leithwood, 2005; Stronge, 2007). While there are many components to effective teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2010; Danielson, 2007; Lemov, 2010; Stronge, 2007), caring is seen as a central feature (Noddings, 1988; Lyman, 2000; Vogt, 2002). Caring is relational (Noblit, 1993; Noddings, 2005) and is best experienced through student-teacher relationships (Alder, 2002; Davis, 2003; Goldstein, 1999; Muller, Katz & Dance, 1999; Pianta, 1999). Just as the Good Shepherd cares for his sheep, good teachers care for their students. Teacher education programs can help pre-service teachers begin their careers following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd.

Teacher Education Programs

During the past decade, there has been an increased cry that university-based teacher education does not give teachers the tools they need (Walsh, 2013). In fact, Levine (2006) suggested, "Teacher education is the Dodge City of the education world. Like the fabled Wild West town, it is unruly and disordered." While this may be an exaggeration, the landscape for teacher education has changed with a wide array of programs from university-based to private providers to district-run programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Grossman, 2008). All programs have a mix of coursework and field experience, but it is how the mix is put together that differs. University-based programs often focus on coursework followed by field experiences; whereas, in alternative programs, pre-service teachers often do coursework while teaching (Grossman & Loeb, 2010). There are disagreements over whether teaching is a profession (which needs preparation before practice) or a craft (which needs preparing during practice). This debate over whether teachers

are professionals or technicians is a struggle for the soul of teaching and teacher education (Zeichner, 2014) and impacts decisions on how and where teachers should be prepared. While these debates rage on, Darling-Hammond (2010) has concluded that the evidence suggests teacher preparation makes a difference in initial effectiveness which allows teachers to persevere long enough to gain needed experience. Regardless of approach, good programs have a clear vision with well-defined standards where the coursework is centered on practice and extended field experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In fact, the best programs connect theory and practice through "both the design of thoughtful coursework and the integration of high quality clinical work in settings where good practice is supported" (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012, p. 167).

An essential element of good programs is striking a balance between aspects of content and pedagogy with helping pre-service teachers develop relational skills centered on the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) along with the accompanying dispositions (Osguthorpe, 2013). Whether these dispositions are seen as Aristotelian virtues (Sockett, 2012) or Deweyan habits of mind (Dottin, 2009), pre-service teachers consciously choose to make caring an integral part of their being (O'Connor, 2008). To make this choice, pre-service teachers need to be authentic by "knowing and being one's self in one's role as a teacher who cares" (Rabin, 2013, p. 245). This means that it is crucial for pre-service teachers to embrace self-knowledge and learn to share one's self with students (Bergman, 2004; Noddings, 2002). Whether a teacher education program adopts the Caring Community Model, which is based on 12 principles centered on notions of compassion, forgiveness, and love (Bruce & Stellern, 2005) or develops its own approach, it is possible to build a caring teacher education program by infusing caring and authenticity along with models of caring practice to help pre-service teachers develop an ethic of care (Rogers & Webb, 1991; Kemp & Reupert, 2012).

For Christian teacher education programs, the lessons from the Good Shepherd further refine the elements of good programs. Good programs focus on content and pedagogy as well as focus on caring relationships in order to help students learn. An

essential component of a caring relationship is the wellbeing of the student. Faculty members need to determine how to create and maintain their programs in order to care for pre-service teachers and help them learn to care for their students. There are five areas for Christian teacher education programs to consider. While many programs already have some of these characteristics, the suggestions below may offer additional ideas:

1. *Administration.* From the very first contact, faculty, and staff can show interest and concern for the pre-service teacher. Admission can be based on a more holistic view of the candidate. This requires multiple indicators such as an interview, references, and other documents such as statement of intent or philosophy of education. Of course, this is more time consuming (and costly) but fits with the importance of the whole person. Since relationships are key, upon admission, pre-service teachers can be assigned an advisor who gets to know the student and is able to do more than simply approve courses. Faculty could serve as advisors who can care for the student by coming alongside and assisting when necessary. Once again, this can be time consuming and more costly as the number of advisees needs to be manageable. Another aspect of care may surface when difficulties emerge. The dean and the student's advisor can work with the pre-service teacher to determine needs and course of action.
2. *Field Experience.* Central to most teacher education programs is the field experience. While these experiences play an important role in the development of pre-service teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000a; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Grootenboer, 2006; Qazi, Rawat & Thomas, 2012), they are very complex (Burn, Hagger & Mutton, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Schultz, 2005). Many factors influence the effectiveness of field experience including pre-service teachers' dispositions and personal traits (Haigh, Pinder and McDonald, 2006), the congruence between the program and the school where program beliefs match with the classroom teacher (Adoniou, 2013; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 1999), and the connection between pre-service teacher and classroom teacher (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). Classroom teachers can be selected, in part, for their belief in the centrality of caring and focus on the wellbeing of students. If faculty and staff know students and classroom teachers, it is possible to make good pairings to enhance the growth and development of the pre-service teachers. The focus on the wellbeing of the pre-service teachers includes careful selection of field supervisors (much like the classroom teacher). This may lead programs to have faculty members, who are already committed to caring and know the pre-service teachers to serve as field supervisors. While it is possible to pair the pre-service teachers with teachers and supervisors who can help navigate issues around caring, it is crucial for the ethic of care and focus on wellbeing to be infused into the program curriculum.
3. *Curriculum.* As with all aspects of teacher preparation, there is some disagreement over the focus and structure of teacher education curriculum. Recently, one emphasis has been core practices of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Forzani, 2014) with some advocating the redesign of the course of study away from traditional boxes like foundation, learning theory, curriculum, and instruction (Ball & Forzani, 2009). Coursework should focus on pre-service teachers performing/practicing a wide variety of teaching activities/tasks. Whether a program decides to redesign the course of study or infuse practice throughout existing courses, one key component of practice is relationships. Pre-service teachers have identified concerns such as the need for guidelines and boundaries (Aultman, Williams-Johnson & Schutz, 2009; Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). While it may be difficult for teacher education programs to set firm guidelines, it is possible to infuse the lessons from the Good Shepherd centered on caring and focused on the wellbeing of students. Just as pre-service teachers should be seen and treated as whole persons, so the curriculum should be treated as whole. This suggests the entire program of study be infused instead of having dedicated courses set aside for the exploration of the lessons from the Good Shepherd. It is possible to adapt suggestions from the literature. For example, Arnstine (1990) suggested activities such as

participation in collaborative learning communities where the ethic of care is demonstrated and then lived by students. Goldstein and Freedman (2003) suggested the use of dialogue journals as a means to develop richer understanding of the relationship between caring and teaching. However, as Goldstein and Freedman discovered, it is not easy to change student preconceptions, especially in connection with caring. These activities can be used in various courses. Here are some other examples: in the area of foundations, the concepts related to being a shepherd such as caring and authenticity could be explored through readings and discussions. Such conversations could focus on the nature of the child, the challenges of caring, and the importance of knowing one's self (Rabin, 2013). This theory could then be tied to practice in the curriculum and instruction courses where pre-service teachers are preparing for their field experiences. These courses could focus on techniques, but it is possible to weave caring with technique such as writing which connects to one's self and concerns along with others (Rabin, 2013).

Of course, field experience itself is the best place for pre-service teachers to work out the lessons from the Good Shepherd. Good field experience needs both organization and preparation in order for caring, content knowledge, and pedagogical techniques to come together in the classroom setting. Under the guidance of the co-operating teacher and field supervisor, the pre-service teacher can bring together all the elements of the shepherd to care for and assist their students.

4. *Faculty*. It is best if pre-service teachers develop the habits of a shepherd prior to their field experience (Dewey, 1922; Dottin, 2009). While the organizational and curricular elements of a program play an important part, "caring teacher education resides in the relation between the professor and the students" (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003, p.452), which means it is crucial for faculty to model being a shepherd. Faculty members committed to these ideas have the habits of a shepherd, the habits of the Good Shepherd, and thus see themselves as

shepherds. They live out the personal character of the Good Shepherd; namely, someone who is dedicated to students and aware of their needs, as well as someone who is skillful in their work. They also live out caring relationships with students where they take time to listen and get to know others and share themselves with others. Such relationships will help faculty not force or demand too much but, instead, work within the boundaries of the program to help all students succeed. And finally, good faculty are mindful of their position in relation to students. When should faculty be in front, beside and/or behind their students? The Good Shepherd suggests that position is situational and this can be modeled as a teacher, as an administrator, and as an advisor.

5. *Emerging Issues*. The four areas discussed are central to creating and maintain good teacher education. Like all teacher preparation programs, Christian programs are experiencing new challenges as the landscape for teacher education continues to change. One of these challenges revolves around the emergence of technology. Technology is a challenge in two ways. First, principals expect pre-service teachers to begin their careers proficient in the use of technology in instructional practice. Not only is this crucial due to the school context, but proficiency with digital technology would allow teachers to help students access and construct knowledge (Swan, Kin and Van't Hooft, 2008). In fact, good teacher education programs help pre-service teachers use technology to facilitate group and individualized learning, provide technical expertise, and use technology for assessment and data-driven instruction (Collier, Burkholder & Branum, 2013). Depending upon a program's approach to curriculum, teacher education needs to either have formal coursework on instructional practices or to infuse their courses with such practices (Muller & Weaver, 2008). There are two issues to address: a) most university-based programs need better classroom technology to match technology in place in the schools and b) some teacher education faculty need to become more proficient in the use of technology in order to model instructional practices.

Second, technology is changing how teacher preparation is/can be done. In the past, teacher education was primarily face-to-face interaction between professor and students (along with student-to-student). Now there is a demand for distance and online interaction. This challenge exists in terms of coursework and field experience (Glenn, Imig & Anderson, 2008). Should technology be simply a part of courses? Should technology lead to the elimination of face-to-face classes? Should technology be used for observation and study of pre-service teaching? Holland, Eckart and Alber (2014) suggested that technology can be used to create real-time interactions between classroom teachers and pre-service teachers where teaching is observed, then conversed about with the assistance of technology. While these questions are important, for this paper, a central issue remains how professors can intentionally check on the wellbeing of their students and be relational with pre-service teachers at a distance and online. The Good Shepherd is calling us to develop relationships and demonstrate an “ethic of care” but how is this done at a distance via technology? It seems essential for professors (and programs) to establish boundaries to avoid inappropriate communication.

Another emerging issue revolves around the changing demographics of many school jurisdictions. As classrooms become more diverse, teacher education needs to help pre-service teachers prepare to meet the needs of all students (Glenn, Imig & Anderson, 2008). This challenge cuts to the very core of the ethic of caring. What does caring look like in other cultures? How can teacher educators help pre-service teachers understand how to care for students from different cultures? The Good Shepherd knows all his sheep. Good teachers know their students—who they are, what they value, how they live—which means that pre-service teachers need to develop understanding and practices of culturally appropriate caring. Good teacher education programs will have either formal coursework or infuse their courses with such understanding and practices depending upon a program’s approach to curriculum. Some teacher education faculty may need to develop deeper understandings of

other cultures and religions. But, following the model of the Good Shepherd, professors can help pre-service teachers to care for all their students.

There are many challenges surrounding teacher education. Schools help students prepare for and enter into increasingly competitive work environments and complex lives. Teachers have a significant impact on students. Teacher education plays an important role in the preparation and development of teachers. With all of the pressures, it is crucial not to lose sight of the ethical component of teaching with caring at the center. Caring relationships make a difference. In order for teachers to engage students with an ethic of care and enter into caring relationships with students, caring should be infused into the fiber of teacher education programs.

The Good Shepherd provides one model of caring that places the wellbeing of students as a priority, and can be infused into Christian teacher education programs. The above suggestions require faculty to answer a few foundational questions. First, does this understanding of the Good Shepherd fit them? If so, are faculty members willing to develop and live out the habits of the Good Shepherd? Second, how will programs include the Good Shepherd model? Is the model infused throughout the program? If not, what can be added?

Conclusion

While the centrality of caring to effective teaching is becoming clearer, caring relationships between teachers and students, professors and students are complex. It is possible for teachers, both pre-service and experienced teachers, to move beyond seeing care as an instinctive trait to a virtue and habit that can be learned. Yet, in order to move, a teacher needs to know one’s self in a way that allows the teacher to be authentic. This authenticity enables teachers to see others, make meaningful connections, and consciously choose to care for others. While caring is an important part of student-teacher relationships, many teachers struggle with conceptualizing and enacting their caring role. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The model of the Good Shepherd demands actual caring and offers valuable insights to both Christian teachers and Christian teacher education programs.

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