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The Necessary Conversation: Faith to Sustain Teaching Practices

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Abstract

In this essay, the author raises critical questions about the need for faith-based teacher preparation programs to consider engaging pre-service teachers in conversations about the connection between faith and the ability to persist in the work of teaching. Grounded in the ethic of care, the author suggests educators must begin with caring for self in order to maintain the ability of caring for students. Suggestions for Christian teacher education programs are explored.

The Question

Our coffee cups were empty. The Saturday breakfast crowd was gone, and the room was quiet. We had been discussing Trixie's first year of teaching. As both her former professor and current visitor/researcher in her classroom, I had a front row view of her teaching. Most of our conversation that day centered around the difficult work of teaching, though our discussion had taken many twists and turns. We laughed and cried...not at all unusual for a novice teacher sitting with her mentor. We were finished; the recorder was turned off. The interactive interview that was a part of my dissertation research was over; and then Trixie gave me one more nugget. As we were leaving, she mentioned her small group. As newlyweds, she and her husband were in a weekly small group as a part of their faith community. This group consisted of young professionals, all newly married, who were also all walking into their adult lives. Trixie noted how significant this group of people had been to her during her first year of teaching. I nodded, listening while I packed my bag. And then I heard the words that stopped me cold in my tracks. She said, "You know, it's funny that ya'll talked a lot to us in the program about how our faith informs our practices in the classroom. You never mentioned how important faith would be to keep you going." I was stunned. Trixie's statement has hounded me for four years. I find myself revisiting this statement

constantly. How is it that at a faith-based institution, where we make faith integration a priority in teacher education, we discussed faith to inform your practices, yet failed to mention how faith sustains your practices?

As a faith-informed teacher educator, my mind often wanders back to this conversation. In fact, I would consider it one of the major discoveries of my dissertation and my journey as a teacher educator. While the idea of an ethic of care has permeated pedagogical conversations in departments of education, both secular and faith-based, for three decades (Noddings & Brooks, 2017), Trixie's statement that day re-framed the issue for me and caused a deeper examination. Nell Noddings (1984) introduced the term "ethic of care" into the lexicon of education. Care ethics is grounded in the belief that care is relational. The roles of both the care giver and the care receiver and the reciprocal relationship between the two are fundamental in the care cycle. In this way, the actions of the cared for are as significant as the actions of the person giving the care. Both parties must contribute to the relationship. While the care relationship may not always be equal, it must always be reciprocal. All ethical decisions flow out of this mutuality. In contrast to ethics of reason and justice, care ethics is needs based, not rights based (Noddings & Brooks, 2017). Quite simply, I give each student what they need as opposed to giving each student the same thing. Grounded in the relationship and utilizing the ability to listen to and assess students' needs discerningly, teachers make careful decisions based on individual needs. As moral agents of care, "...carers listen to the expressed need, feel something as a result, and responds sensitively—not always positively—to the need expressed" (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 15). All responses to expressed needs are designed to preserve the integrity of the relationship. This has served as the foundation for my teaching in every

classroom I have entered. However, it was not until I was a doctoral candidate that I read Noddings' suggestion in *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (1992), that education "...might be best organized around center of care: care for self, for intimate others, for associates and acquaintances, for distant others, for nonhuman animals, for plants and physical environment, for the human-made world of objects and instruments, and for ideas" (p. xiii). I noticed that foremost on Noddings' list was "care for self," but not until Trixie's words that day did I fully comprehend the significance of Noddings' words.

Whether faith-based or secular, most institutions address both explicitly and implicitly the principle of the ethic of care. Current trends in education and best practices taught in most teacher preparation programs such as differentiation (Tomlinson, 2001), personalized learning (Marzano, 1993), and restorative discipline (Hopkins, 2002) are grounded in the idea of decisions being made on the basis of individual needs, not rights, one of the tenets of care ethics. At a Christian university, our faith should permeate these conversations. The conversations and instruction surrounding an ethic of care must be explicit, intentional and clearly connected to faith. My experiences with the members of The International Christian Community for Teacher Education (ICCTE), and other professional organizations, provide evidence this is happening in teacher preparation programs.

Still, my mind keeps going back to my conversation with Trixie on that day in the coffee shop. Are Christian teacher educators talking to pre-service teachers about faith as sustenance and as care for their soul? Faith is the medium that informs my acts of self-care. Yes, my faith informs my practices. It informs my relationships with colleagues, my curricular decisions, my approach to classroom management and discipline, and the hospitality I extend to students and their families. However, what is more significant is that my faith sustains these practices.

As a literacy specialist, the analogy that comes to mind is one of a reader and their book choices. Of course, my abilities as a reader inform my book choices. I choose books I can read and read well. Yet, the choices, the quality of literature, the power

of the stories, sustain me as a reader. They nurture my love of reading and my life as a reader. The relationship between the two is symbiotic. One cannot exist without the other. In the same way, teacher educators must prepare our pre-service teachers to the best of our abilities in content and curriculum, we must also inform them about this symbiosis. Just as stories sustain me as a reader, the acts of self-care that are part of my faith practices sustain me as a teacher.

Faith to Sustain Teaching

Faith informs my practice. Faith also sustains my practice. The great secret, hidden from the view of many, is that faith can only inform practice if you are actively sustaining your faith and it you. Parker Palmer (1998) writes "Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together" (p.2). Faith is what sustains, protects, guards, instructs, and heals the condition of my soul. Trixie's words captured for me the true meaning of faith integration as a teacher educator. For me, faith integration isn't simply about a specific assignment or praying for and with my students. True faith integration comes when I model for my students the connection between the care I give my soul and the care I give my students.

As I think back to the many first year teachers I have observed, I now realize this is what I want them to know most about the connection between faith and teaching practice. If they remember only one thing, I want them to remember that when you teach, you are projecting the condition of your soul onto your students (Palmer, 1998). Therefore, the caretaking of your soul is critical to sustainable teaching. It is as important as staying current in pedagogy. And, dare I say, perhaps more important. I have witnessed teachers with great skill and current pedagogy do harm to children. The reverse is also true. I have watched teachers whose pedagogy is a bit less innovative, but whose "inner landscape" (Palmer, 1998, p. 5) is vibrant do amazing things with children. The best pedagogy in the world will not save your teaching if the condition of your soul is not healthy. For this reason, faith to nurture, protect and sustain your inner landscape, your soul, becomes of critical

importance. Content knowledge and pedagogy do matter. Teaching is a complex endeavor and teachers must be prepared to do the difficult work of teaching. Loving children is important, but it is not enough. My faith demands that I maintain the highest standards for my students in any classroom I enter. Pre-service teachers must rigorously train to become teachers. However, I do want to clearly let my students know that in addition to being experts in content and pedagogy, they must protect and guard the condition of their soul. If you lose the ability to reflect on the condition of your soul, your teaching cannot easily recover from the loss. Christian educators who lose their spiritual mooring will find their classroom practices less effective. Their teaching will suffer.

This is the discussion I fear is lacking in departments of teacher education at faith-based institutions. Palmer (1998) states, “The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it” (p. 148). In light of Trixie’s comments at the coffee shop that day, I contemplate if I, as a teacher educator, have honestly spoken with my colleagues and students about faith to sustain practice—faith to care for the condition of the soul. The connection between the care given to one’s inner landscape (Palmer, 1998) and the care you can then give to students.

During her first year as a teacher, Trixie utilized her faith to sustain in the challenges of marriage, teaching, and life and this was evident in her interactive interviews and journaling (Talley, 2014). Regrettably, she did not learn this in our teacher preparation program, even at a faith-based institution. While Trixie’s time in our program did focus on how faith, or faith-based principles, can inform your chosen vocation, little to no time was spent on examining spirituality as a sustenance giving. As a faculty member of the faith-based university Trixie attended, this revelation stunned me. Knowing that teaching is a stressful vocation, filled with a giving of oneself daily, and utilizing my faith for my own sustenance, I was shocked to realize that there had been little formal discussion of faith as sustenance in our program. The question as I now see it is this: As teacher educators at a Christian university, how do we prepare our pre-

service teachers to use their faith and spiritual practices to support the difficult work of teaching?

The Path Forward

If teaching is a spiritual endeavor, in that it allows those who to teach to “...answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life...” (Palmer, 1998, p. 5), Christian teacher education programs must begin to equip their students to ameliorate their stress through spiritual practices. While spiritual practices will look different for each individual due to personalities and faith traditions, attention must be given to the issue. Attending to the spiritual may include seeking solitude, meditating, or meditative readings, walking along the beach or in the woods, keeping a journal, participating in a faith community, exploring hobbies, physical activity, or finding a friend or family member who will listen (Freitag, 2016; Palmer 1998). Whatever it looks like per individual, it must be done. Teachers, and teacher educators, must be attuned to our inner being, the part inside of us all that longs to be connected to the largeness of life. The biblical text provides many examples of God’s people renewing their spirits and reconnecting to their faith in both the Old and New Testament. Examining the life of Jesus in the New Testament, believers have many examples. Jesus spent time alone. He spent time with friends. He spent time in quiet and prayer. In Mark chapter six, when things were so busy that the apostles had not eaten or rested in some time, Jesus urged them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31, New International Version). The text then states the apostles went away by themselves by boat to find solitude. In the narrative of Jesus’ time with His apostles, this brief respite happened during one of the most hectic periods of traveling, preaching and performing miracles. In the midst of His brief life on earth, while fulfilling His holy ministry, Jesus understood the need for renewal. Palmer (2000) reminds us that “...self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others” (p. 30).

Simply put, you cannot give what you don’t have. Currently, few, if any, teacher education programs provide students with any instruction on how to cope with the daily stresses of teaching (Hartwick &

Kang, 2013). Drawing from data collected from a sample of 1000 teachers, Hartwick (2007) found if matters of spirituality are discussed at all in a teacher education program, they are discussed in terms of being called to teach. Teacher education programs must work towards reversing this trend.

First and foremost, teacher educators must model for our students the connection between care for your soul and its connection to your teaching. This is no easy feat. It demands that we are mindful of paying attention to our inner landscape and making public, when appropriate, our private faith practices. Many of us depend on our faith and our faith communities to sustain our work. However, grappling with how to share and model this with our pre-service teachers is challenging. How do teacher educators have this conversation with our students and yet maintain our status as the “expert” in the room? Freytag (2016) in *Embodying and Modeling Healthy Self-Care in Teacher Education* wrestles with the same question. She suggests the most caring thing one can do is model what it means to be a “...genuine human being who exemplifies appropriate vulnerability by humbly admitting that I do not always have the answers and I, too, need help” (p. 4).

In our program, faculty are attempting to engage in these conversations with our pre-service teachers. I confess our attempts at times seem feeble and faculty continue to grapple with how to have intentional conversations with pre-service teachers about faith to sustain teachers in the difficult work of teaching. As with most things, students will learn best through our modeling in our own lives how faith sustains our practices. In my own practice, I attempt to share pieces of my own faith journey with my students. Conversations with students happen in individual, small group and large group settings. This type of conversation requires vulnerability on my part. I must be open and honest about how I use my faith practices (journaling, participating in a small group, practicing solitude, etc.) to sustain me in teaching and why I need to do so. The conversations must include disclosing my own doubts, fears and struggles. Doing so also requires that I admit to my pre-service teachers the true difficulties of teaching in schools today. Often, as teacher educators, we are reluctant to fully

discuss the enormous challenges facing teachers today for fear that it will discourage new teachers from entering the field (Talley, 2014). Practicing this type of vulnerability with our students seems counter-intuitive, but it serves our teaching well (Freytag, 2016; Matthias, 2015). Good teaching is a “daily exercise in vulnerability” (Palmer, 1998, p. 17). In modeling this type of vulnerability, teacher educators are giving their pre-service teachers permission to be vulnerable as well and this is necessary to sustain good teaching (Freytag, 2016).

Examples from One Program

On a larger scale, our department has attempted to have this conversation in an event we schedule at the end of the semester of student teaching. After students have completed their final week of student teaching, we call them back into community on campus for an event we call Launch. Based on my conversation with Trixie and other findings in my dissertation research, our faculty realized that after the most formative experience of their teacher education program, student teaching, we were simply ending the semester with little if any time to reflect on the events of student teaching in a meaningful or formative manner. During Launch, faculty spend one or two days, depending on what time allows, guiding students in both individual and group reflection so they may understand and learn from their student teaching experiences as fully as possible. A good deal of this time is spent discussing the need for spiritual practices such as reflecting and journaling, seeking solitude and Sabbath and participating in a faith community, as a means of sustaining your teaching. Specifically, in Launch, faculty examine school culture and discuss how to find a healthy school culture. Discussions include topics such as the need for quality mentors and how and where to find them in both your professional and personal life. Conversations pertaining to the setting of appropriate boundaries for oneself and the necessity of healthy boundaries to protect the ability to care for self and other are also included (Freytag, 2016). Students reflect on their use of time during student teaching and assess how time can and should be dedicated to self-care. After having been “in the trenches” the students have a greater understanding of the significance of the issue and are hungry for the conversation. However, I regret that our program is saving this

conversation for the end of program. Again, as teacher educators, we are navigating that tension between what they need to know and when they are able to know it.

Another event that holds potential for my program is our New Teacher Institute. In North American schools, 40-50 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Maciejewski, 2007). To combat the problem, our program annually hosts a New Teacher Institute the second weekend in June. Over the course of a long weekend, we provide 15 hours of high quality professional development, along with meals and lodging, to graduates of our program from the previous five years. During this weekend, alumni of our program learn from professionals and have the opportunity to mentor each other and the faculty of our program. This is done in community with each other in the place where they first started their teaching journey. At the end of the weekend, we give each teacher two books to read. One is a professional resource; the other is a spiritual read. While in the past, the conversations pertaining to faith and spiritual practices have been incidental and largely happened during communal meals, coffee breaks and private conversations, this year we will for the first time feature a speaker who will be addressing spiritual practices and their connection to teaching. While this program does not directly impact pre-service teachers, it does influence teachers in the critical novice or induction period and has implications for pre-service teachers as well. In the future, inviting teacher candidates into dialogue with the novice teachers may provide a safe space for conversations pertaining to faith as sustenance in teaching. Engaging in conversations with their peers, pre-service teachers may be able to better comprehend the need to proactively prepare for the stresses of classroom teaching. It is one thing for your professor to discuss this issue in a university setting; it is a different matter entirely for you to hear an alumnus close to your own age, who is currently in the classroom, verbalize the real trials and tribulations of teaching and articulate the need for faith-informed self-care to sustain their practice.

Small group events also provide fertile ground for conversations pertaining to faith and teaching.

Being with students in small groups outside of classroom instructional time allows for deeper relationships to develop both between students and faculty and students. Teacher education faculty at my university host a variety of small group events. One secondary professor hosts book talks at his home on Sunday evenings twice a month. Students share a meal with the faculty member and his family and then share conversations pertaining to the book of choice for the semester. Many times, the book is a spiritual read. Secondary students overwhelmingly mention these book talks as one of the most formative experiences of their time in our program. One of my colleagues and I host a Rookie Club for new teachers in our local schools. If you are a graduate of our program and have been teaching for less than five years, you are invited once a month for dinner and conversation in one of our homes. We have a meal, a pertinent topic to discuss, and door prizes. Often with these practicing novice teachers, the conversation turns to matters of faith and teaching. In fact, many novice teachers express that simply making the time to come to Rookies every month is indeed an act of self-care. While this is a ripe opportunity to work with novice teachers in the critical induction period, it also holds great potential for impacting practices with pre-service teachers. First, the faculty members present learn a great deal about what was done well in program and what work remains. Second, by providing local teachers support, faculty are training a new generation of mentor teachers for pre-service teachers in our program. And, as above, there is the potential to invite pre-service teachers into conversation with the novice teachers. Frequently the faculty in our program utilize these novice teachers as mentors for students in the program, guest speakers in our university classrooms and colleagues in the planning of curriculum development and design.

All the above practices, both formal and informal, are grounded in deep personal connections with students. This type of intentional relationship is one of the foundations of modeling healthy self-care for students (Freitag, 2015/2016). Teacher preparation programs must explore options outside of the university classroom so that faculty may form the type of deep relationships necessary for conversations pertaining to our doubts, fears and

struggles and how we utilize our faith as a means for sustaining our practice in the midst of these forces.

Conclusion

Four years later and my coffee cup is empty again. I am back at the coffee shop, my secret writing hideaway. The questions today seem bigger than ever. Trixie's question is still on my mind. And there are new questions. Another former student texted weeks ago saying "I'm at the point of questioning why I even do what I do and if I am really cut out to be a special education teacher. I hate being beat down and going home every day totally mentally and emotionally drained" (program graduate, personal communication, April 29, 2018). Weeks later, she informed me she has decided to leave teaching. I can't help but wonder what factors contributed to her decision to leave and if there was any way our teacher preparation program could have prepared her to be more resilient. In her text, I heard deep frustration. Her words and story echo those of Matthias (2015) in *The Cry of a Teacher's Soul*. Matthias (2015) warns that teacher educators must listen to the cries of teachers because, if not addressed, "...burnout and attrition will inevitably happen" (p. xv). My recent experiences confirm her words. Two stellar novice teachers have confided in me in recent months that they will be leaving the classroom. In my mind, command of the content and love for their students is not the problem. Fatigue, frustration and burnout lie at the heart of the issue. Could they have more fully utilized their faith in order to sustain their teaching? Teacher educators cannot afford to allow students to fail to make the connection between their work lives and their faith journey. Pre-service teachers must see their spiritual life and their academic life as fully integrated (Shotsberger, 2018) because as future teachers, they cannot be personally committed if they are not spiritually invested...and neither can their professors.

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