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Tales from a Recession: Encouragement for New Teachers during Uncertain Times

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Tales from a Recession: Encouragement for New Teachers during Uncertain Times

Abstract

New teachers will be facing many uncertainties this year as they begin their teaching career after a worldwide pandemic. As teacher educators, we are called to care for our students not only in our courses but also as they journey into their first years of teaching. This essay reflects on lessons the author learned from entering her own teaching career during the Great Recession and words of encouragement for teacher educators looking to support their new graduates during such a challenging yet exciting time.

Keywords

new teachers, teacher preparation

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Carolyn Mitten, Westmont College

Introduction

During the Spring 2020 semester, I had the distinct pleasure of teaching both the student teaching and senior seminars for our education department. The semester began with excitement and joy – graduation was within reach and the anticipation of a new chapter saturated the air. Many of our seniors were ready to start the “real work” of student teaching next year and our student teachers were thrilled to be living out their dreams of working with students every day. As a new faculty member, I often felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of my role in shaping these culminating experiences for our students. Each week we engaged in thoughtful discussions about teaching as a Christian vocation, developing close relationships with students and colleagues, and sharing our love of God through our actions in the classroom. While I poured hours into creating these moments with my students, it felt joyful to bring my faith back into the classroom after years of teaching in secular spaces, and I eagerly anticipated our meetings each week.

During the week before spring break, our students looked forward to the opportunity to catch their breath and reconnect with friends and family. None of us anticipated that it would be the last face-to-face interaction we had that semester. Suddenly, I found myself alongside students who, once filled with joy and anticipation, were now overwhelmed with worry and doubt about their futures. If I am honest with myself, I doubted my own ability to understand what they were feeling and thinking at this moment and feared hosting too many videoconferences for the sake of adding to their growing to-do lists. Not to mention, I was feeling immense pressure to quickly adapt my

own instruction into uncomfortable online formats to make sure they were prepared for student teaching, despite having no idea what skills they might need.

As we headed into the fall of 2020, the uncertainty of the future lingered and many of the anxieties of what K-12 teaching might look like during a pandemic were heavy. By the grace of God, I was able to teach in person with my students the majority of the semester, and many of our student teachers were in-person at some point during the academic year. Our student teachers were resilient and positive in the face of uncharted territory, and we were blessed for the incredible teaching gifts they brought to their classrooms. Yet, their worries about the future remained. What would their classrooms look like next year? How would the skills they have developed this year translate to a “normal” classroom setting? Would it even feel “normal” next year? What would the job market look like?

In the midst of the rollercoaster of emotions last year, I was contacted by my alma mater to give advice and encouragement to the graduating class from the class of 2008. At first I thought this was odd, but as I considered it I realized that graduating at the start of the Great Recession did carry similar uncertainties. Many graduates in my class were fearful of their futures and the value of their degrees because the job market was rapidly shrinking. I was going into a teaching field where veteran teachers delayed retirement to support their families and teaching positions were cut or condensed to limit new hires.

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Even in math education where jobs are often more plentiful, I found few openings – particularly in the middle grades I wanted to teach. After a laborious search and multiple interviews, I received a job offer at the high school where my cooperating teacher’s daughter had just purposefully resigned. I was anxious and seeking clarity and peace from God.

Our circumstances are certainly not identical, but reflecting on the experiences of my student teachers the past year and my own journey made me realize we do share some of the same mixed emotions in the face of starting a new job – joy, worry, excitement, and loss. As someone who thrives on detailed plans, I found myself in unpredictable and stressful circumstances. During the pandemic, classroom teachers across the United States were faced with many unknowns that required them to make significant shifts in their instruction while adopting new technologies at the same time. Many teachers found assessing student learning, communication with families, and balancing their personal and work lives to be challenging (Marshall et al., 2020). As a result, teachers reported lower levels of self-efficacy (Pressley & Ha, 2021) and higher levels of anxiety, leading to worries regarding teacher burnout (Pressley, 2021). In the midst of these circumstances, many of our student teachers entered classrooms remotely and felt the loss of the student teaching experience they once imagined for themselves.

As teacher educators, we are called by God to care for our students (Schat & Freytag, 2020), not only when they are in our teaching credential programs, but also as they transition into their new teaching roles (Tinholt, 2018). According to care theory, the caring relation entails the teacher attending to students’ expressed needs and responding to those needs, as well as the students responding to the teacher’s care (Noddings, 2012). As Christian teacher educators, that care is often expressed through our intentional relationships, strong pedagogy, and shared faith (Freytag, 2018). Given the many mountains our student teachers have climbed during the pandemic, the next few years are a critical time for us as faculty to care for our students and encourage them to lean on their faith to sustain them during challenging times (Talley, 2018). As we consider what this might

look like, I would like to share some words of encouragement, practical suggestions, and scripture for teacher educators to share with new teachers based on my own experiences beginning a teaching career in similar uncertain times.

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Be Still

“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Psalms 46:10-11, ESV). In times where life is uncertain and worrisome, it is often easier to think that working harder and faster will help us feel more in control of our circumstances. As a student teacher entering a tough job market, I worked countless hours to get my application materials together for any job within a 50-mile radius. Despite a clear calling to teach from God and a belief in His divine plans, I let my human nature and experiences in American culture overtake me under the pressure to be successful and secure a job. Yet, it was receiving a job offer in the most unlikely circumstances that reminded me that God’s plans are greater than my own.

Our human nature and culture lead us to believe that if we just do more we will accomplish greater things and make our dreams come true. While this idea is not without some merit, God calls us to seek Him first. If teaching is a calling from God, we must be willing to hear Him and follow His lead on where we will bear witness. We must be still and acknowledge that God has reign over all of creation; be still and let Him speak truth into our lives and our future. As teacher educators, we need to encourage new teachers to make space in their busy lives to sit in silence and provide space for God to speak into their lives. Setting aside

sacred time every day to calm their minds and bodies provides an opportunity to hear what God has to say about what the future may hold. I not only encourage our new teachers to take time for prayer in their classrooms each morning before students arrive, but to also set aside time on the weekend to *rest* and be more mindful of their emotional and spiritual well-being. In fact, research has shown the practice of observing the Sabbath can have significant positive effects on one's physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health (Speedling, 2019) and practicing mindfulness may support emotional regulation and reduce stress for teachers (Emerson et al., 2017). By making space to be still and listen with an open heart and mind, new teachers can welcome God's peace and assurance in the face of the daily stressors of teaching. "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful" (Colossians 3:15, ESV).

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Be Joyous

"You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11, ESV). In being still and giving our worries of the future over to God, we make more space in our lives to find joy in the moment. Beginning a new teaching career is an exciting time where we can celebrate how much we have accomplished already and God's continued faithfulness in leading us to do good work in the world. With limited job opportunities on the horizon, I found it easy to overlook the many things there were to celebrate. Everyone wanted to know what my plans were at graduation, and I worried about the meaning of my hard work if there was no job secured as

tangible evidence. Could I celebrate God's calling when substitute teaching and living at home? Even after accepting a position, the need to shift into planning mode for my new classroom and three new preps felt more urgent than stopping to celebrate how my new position was truly an answer to prayer. Taking time to be still and acknowledging God's larger plans for my life allowed me to experience His "fullness of joy" in a moment that should be celebrated.

As teacher educators, we must encourage our new teachers to put their trust in God's plan so that they too might embrace joy in this new endeavor. Our students have overcome incredible feats during a pandemic--student teaching through constantly shifting circumstances has proven their strength and resilience as future educators. Beyond this year, they have completed rigorous coursework and engaged with teachers and children in a multitude of ways. At our college, they have done all of this through wildfires and mudslides that added to the constant disruption and greater sense of loss. And yet here they stand – to God be the glory! As testament to their resilience in this season, our department took time to share in our graduates' joy by inviting friends, family members, and the college community to join us on Zoom to share stories and inspiration from their student teaching journeys and pray over their next steps. We celebrated each graduate as they *all* confidently began new positions this fall with congratulatory texts and emails, displays with their names and jobs in our office, coffee dates to connect and encourage, and success stories posted on social media. By taking time to acknowledge and praise teaching excellence, we are building teacher confidence and intrinsic motivation to continually improve (Andrews, 2011). Just as we continue to cultivate joy with our graduates in these ways, I encourage other teacher educators to speak boldly of your new teachers' accomplishments through celebratory events with families and friends, sharing of gifts and notes of encouragement, and joining with one another in the loudest praise and worship of a God who has seen us through it all. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13, ESV).

Be Confident

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9, ESV). In stressful situations, it is in our human nature to second-guess ourselves and our gifts. After accepting my first position as a teacher, I suddenly found myself wondering if I was actually prepared to be on my own. What would I do when I faced classroom management issues with a very different grade level and classroom size than where I student taught? How would I learn all the new and different technologies in my classroom? I loved Calculus as a student, but did I actually have the depth of conceptual understanding to teach it to others well? When paralyzed with fear and what some call “imposter syndrome,” my confidence ultimately came from the Lord. After all, God had called me to teaching for a reason and put incredible mentors and educators along my path so that I might be successful in serving God through my work in the classroom.

Because of the unusual circumstances of student teaching during a pandemic, our new teachers are voicing similar concerns about being on their own in a future classroom setting that is so different from what they experienced this year. It is difficult for many to imagine what a “normal” classroom environment will look like, which allows doubt to creep in about their ability to teach successfully in the coming years. For this reason, we must challenge our new teachers to also seek their confidence from God and His calling in their lives. We should encourage each new teacher to consider the challenges of student teaching in this season as incredible preparation for the constant changes that happen in every classroom, even when life might be considered “normal.” At the end of the Spring 2021 semester, I met with my student teaching cohort, and we discussed what pandemic teaching strategies and technologies could be adapted to benefit their future classrooms. Many of our students noted the value of technology in enhancing their communication with families or how daily social-emotional check-ins with students helped them learn to build relationships and warm learning communities. This fall, teacher educators should take time to give new teachers a call or visit their classrooms

and reflect on the wealth of knowledge for teaching that was developed *because* of unusual circumstances. By reflecting with our new teachers’ and highlighting their substantial preparation and experience, we can build their confidence and self-efficacy – which can positively impact their job satisfaction, reduce stress, and build resilience (Ngu & Lay, 2020). We should all take confidence in Christ and the ways that our challenges might be used to glorify God and rise to our calling as educators. “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6, ESV).

Be Faithful in Prayer

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6, ESV). Despite following God’s lead and feeling confident in the ways He prepared me to teach, there were still countless ups and downs throughout the first years of teaching. One of the practices that truly grounded me throughout those times was prayer. Before the year began, I would pray over my classroom and my future students. My commute became a powerful time to talk with God about my joys and struggles in the classroom and an opportunity to enter each day with a fresh mindset. Every morning I would also pray for my students and colleagues right before homeroom began. Committing myself to daily prayer helped me navigate those challenging first years and helped me maintain focus on my students and colleagues as part of God’s creation.

At Christian colleges, we are so fortunate to teach in an environment where we can pray together with our students and discuss how their faith intersects with their daily lives. In our program, we discuss frequently how faith intersects with our teaching in public schools and pray with and over our students. As our new graduates enter their first years of teaching, I encourage you to frame teaching as a calling and teach them how to pray for their students. Model it in your own classrooms and encourage your student teachers to structure their days with regular times to meet with the Lord. Testify to how prayer impacted your own work in K-12 schools. Research has

shown that teachers who engage in prayer regularly and view their profession as a calling report greater commitment to their jobs and reduced stress (LaBarbera & Hetzel, 2016). We should set aside time as teacher educators to pray for our new teachers specifically and share encouragement and scripture throughout the year. The greatest joy of our work is seeing our students be successful in their own classrooms and we can continue to support their calling through prayer. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, ESV).

As our new graduates enter their first years of teaching, I encourage you to frame teaching as a calling and teach them how to pray for their students. Model it in your own classrooms and encourage your student teachers to structure their days with regular times to meet with the Lord.

While we know little about what lies ahead for K-12 education in the coming year, be confident in the ways you have prepared your student teachers. The knowledge and skills they have gained in their preparation program will guide their instructional decisions. The flexibility they gained in ever-shifting circumstances will give them confidence to adapt to the needs of their students and families. The deep connections they built with their peers, cooperating teachers, supervisors, and professors in times of crisis will be an ever-present source of strength and joy. Finally, the integration of faith in their teaching journey will encourage them to model their teaching after Christ and rely on Him as they pursue their calling.

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