

Describing the Elephant: Preservice Teachers Talk about Spiritual Reasons for Becoming a Teacher

By Joanne M. Marshall

Given the need for high quality teachers in every classroom, it is important to understand what might contribute to the preparation and persistence of teachers. Two lines of literature in teacher education relate to such an understanding. One line of literature follows the circumstances of how people decide to become teachers. The other line explores the relationship between spirituality and teaching. This paper considers the intersection of those two lines; namely, what is the relationship, if any, between why people enter the K-12 teaching field and the spirituality of teaching?

To answer this research question, two researchers interviewing 18 first-year undergraduates during a program evaluation of an elementary teacher education program at a Catholic institution included three questions related to spirituality, the decision to teach, and what makes a good teacher. We wanted to know how teachers at the very beginning of their careers thought about their teaching choice and how spirituality might relate to it.

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Why People Enter and Stay in Teaching

Empirical work about teaching has tended to focus on new teachers rather than preservice teachers. New teachers, after all, have already completed

Describing the Elephant

their student teaching, graduated, and found their first jobs in schools; whereas preservice teachers have not. Thus there have been good descriptions of how new teachers become acculturated to their profession and the culture of teaching, depending upon their school contexts (Farkas, Johnson, Foleno, Duffett, & Foley, 2000; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Johnson & Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). There have also been several significant studies about the cultural and organizational reasons that teachers stay or don't stay in their new professions. Teachers stay because they find their jobs to be emotionally satisfying and because they feel they are making a difference in students' lives (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Lortie, 1975; Nieto, 2003; Quartz, 2003; Young, 1995). Teachers leave for a variety of reasons, including lack of pay as well as difficult working conditions, some of which are grounded in school poverty and inequity (Alt, Henke, & Perry, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001b; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Liu & Meyer, 2005; Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2007; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kempler, & Olsen, 1991; K. Palmer, 2007). Although teacher turnover may be higher than educators might like, an analysis by Henke, Zahn, and Carroll (2001) of all college graduates from the National Center for Education Statistics' Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study contradicted the common belief that teacher turnover is greater than that of other professions. Instead, after leaving college, K-12 teachers were "among the most stable of all employed graduates with respect to their occupations three years later" (p. vi). The authors were careful to note that their data depended upon graduates from one point in time and might not have been representative of the market as a whole, but they also noted that, like other college graduates who persist in their profession, graduates who continued to teach were those whose undergraduate fields of study were closely related to their work. If teachers majored in education as undergraduates, they were more likely to stay in teaching.

Thus teacher persistence seems to be related to choosing and completing an undergraduate teaching major, which presumably helps prepare teachers for their eventual career in schools. There therefore seems to be some justification for backing research up to a previous step in a teacher's career by asking why people would be interested enough in teaching to enter a preservice teaching program. Answering that question has implications for recruitment into teacher education, particularly elementary teacher education, as well as for eventual teacher retention.

A recent literature review by Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley (2006) indicated that certain characteristics predict entry to teaching. Demographically, White females are more likely than either people of color or males to enter teaching, though the authors observed that the proportion of females to males has declined over time and that more non-Whites have entered the profession since the 1990s than in previous decades. But more relevant to this study, their review also included studies of "psychological factors" which drew potential teachers into teaching, such as loving

Joanne M. Marshall

one's work and contributing to society. Like the teachers who persisted because they found their jobs emotionally satisfying and felt they were making a difference, there is some evidence that preservice teachers entered their programs in order to make a difference, especially compared with their non-education peers, who rated the importance of salary more highly (King, 1993; Shipp, 1999). This is not to say that financial security and salary are not important to preservice teachers, since at least some have identified finances as a factor in their decision-making (Krecic & Grmek, 2005; Richardson & Watt, 2005). However, financial security usually has appeared in the literature as a factor to be overcome rather than as a factor which motivates people to teach, especially for teachers of color (Gordon, 2000, 2002). Instead, most preservice teachers (Sinclair, 2006; Young, 1995), including second-career teachers (Chambers, 2002; Gordon, 1993; Serow, 1993), have identified altruistic factors such as a desire to help people as most important to their decision to teach.

Serow (1994; See also Serow, Eaker, & Ciechalski, 1992) has gone further and categorized these psychological factors as one of "calling." His research has indicated that preservice teachers who agreed with a statement such as, "I feel that teaching is my calling in life" were more likely also to indicate that they will stay committed to teaching. The notion of calling has also been identified by other researchers as important to preservice teachers choosing to enter teaching (Gordon, 1993; Mayes, Mayes, & Sagmiller, 2003; Whitbeck, 2000). Being called to teach is of interest because of the second line of research pursued here, that of spirituality and teaching.

Spirituality and Teaching

The research on spirituality in teaching has been fairly recent and has tended to be philosophical and theoretical rather than empirical. There has long been a popular demand for rich dramatic accounts of the daily life of teaching and the connection teachers make with their students, from *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (Hilton, 1934) and *To Sir, with Love* (Braithwaite, 1960) to *Stand and Deliver* (Menendez, 1988), and *Freedom Writers* (LaGravense, 2007). In addition to these popular accounts, educators have established a literature about the spirit and deeper meaning of teaching. Most notable are Parker Palmer (1983; 1993; 1998; 1998-1999; 2001), who has emphasized the inner life of teachers, and Nel Noddings (1993; 1995), who has emphasized the care and ethic of teaching. From these themes of inner life and care have come definitions of spirituality in schooling. Palmer has written in his most well-known book, *The Courage to Teach*, that spirituality is "the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching" (1998, p. 3). Other educators have defined spirituality in education as "belonging and connectedness, meaning and purpose" (Lantieri, 2001, p. 7) or "that influential part of human kind that allows us to make meaning in our lives...what compels us to make human connections, and ...provides for us our sense of ontology and teleology, our

Describing the Elephant

sense of being and purpose for being" (Dantley, 2005b, pp. 501-502). There have been several definitions of spirituality, most of which include transcendence and connections outside the self(Bagwell, 2003; Bolman & Deal, 2001; Dantley, 2005a; Fullan, 2002; Hafner & Capper, 2005; Kessler, 2001; Moffett, 1994; Nash, 2001; Purpel, 1989; Rendón, 2005; Wade-Gayles, 1995). Spirituality is a more inclusive term than religion, though religious people may define their spirituality within their particular religious framework. Both religious and non-religious teachers can find "connections outside self" in the profession and in their classroom.

While some well-regarded educational administration journals have devoted thematic issues to spirituality and education (see, for example, *Educational Leadership* 56:4, 1998-1999; *School Administrator* 59:8, 2002; and *Journal of School Leadership* 15:6, 2005), there has still been little empirical work done on the relationship between spirituality and teaching. An early study on the relationship of teachers' personal lives to their teaching did include spiritual belief as one component, especially for male teachers (Pajak & Blase, 1989). Some work with African American teachers and educators has acknowledged the importance of African American spirituality in maintaining a sense of purpose and emancipation for a university professor (Dillard, 2000; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000) and for superintendents in striving for excellence (Alston, 2005). Tisdell's research (2002) has connected the spirituality of adult educators with their work for social justice. These exceptions are still, however, not focused on preservice teachers. One of the few empirical studies of preservice teachers and their spirituality is that of Mayes, Mayes, and Sagmiller (2002), who interviewed 10 preservice teachers at Brigham Young University and 10 at Southern Oregon University who claimed a "spiritual calling" to teach. The authors concluded that preservice programs, which already encourage teacher reflectivity, should specifically encourage spiritual reflectivity, a conclusion C. Mayes has emphasized in other work as well (2001; 2002).

An Intersection: Why Teach? Spiritual Reasons

The current state of literature on preservice teaching, as revealed by these two strands, seems to be that to a great extent teachers enter and stay in teaching for reasons that have to do with calling or "psychological factors" (Guarino et al., 2006, p. 179). Teachers want to make a difference via teaching and thus find a sense of purpose. Making a difference and finding purpose are exactly what Palmer and others have identified as spiritual constructs. However, only with the fairly recent advent of the literature on spirituality and teaching can we name an experience that many educators have already known for a while—that teaching is often a spiritual exercise. What we have not known is whether preservice teachers also think about their teaching in spiritual terms, and whether that spirituality has anything to do with their decision to enter teaching. Our research question for this study, therefore, was: What connection, if any, is there between why people enter teaching and the spirituality of teaching?

Methods

Much of the literature about why preservice teachers enter teaching has been based upon quantitative methodology. Preservice teachers have been surveyed, for example, and asked to select among or agree/disagree with a variety of statements that reflect their motivation to enter teaching, such as whether friends and family are teachers or whether someone has encouraged them to go into teaching. These studies are invaluable for the large number of students surveyed and their statistical power. However, responding to a questionnaire limits the choices and the language participants can use and precludes follow-up questions. Given that spirituality is defined in so many different ways, the researchers decided upon an epistemology of constructivism, where knowledge and meaning are constructed by different people in different ways depending upon the context (Crotty, 1998). Thus we chose to interview preservice students.

Participants in this study were the entire first-year cohort ($n=18$) of undergraduates in an elementary teacher preparation program at a Catholic institution. All of the interviews were audiotaped with the consent of participants and in accordance with conditions of anonymity and protection of data approved by the Institutional Review Board. Two researchers unaffiliated with the elementary teacher preparation program asked candidates a series of questions about their experience with the teacher preparation program, including the three questions below. Other questions asked these students why they chose this institution, how they learn, and about their experience with the program in general. Tapes were transcribed and responses to questions were coded according to emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005).

Rationale for Interview Questions

After reviewing the literature, we developed three questions relevant to our research question about the decision to teach and spirituality:

1. Does your own spirituality affect your teaching?
2. How did you become interested in teaching as a career?
3. What do you think are the characteristics of a good teacher?

Question one asked directly about students' spirituality and teaching, since the teacher education program requires a variety of field experiences associated with coursework during the first year. We deliberately chose not to define the term spirituality, but instead to listen to what participants had to say and consider the language they used in response to the question.

Questions two and three asked students, as a number of items in some quantitative studies have, to reflect upon their interest in becoming a teacher and what they believe to be characteristics of good teachers.

Describing the Elephant

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, transcripts were read repeatedly, and the responses to the three interview questions were summarized and entered into tables, ordered by question and then by student, in an iterative process similar to that described by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002). Using those summary tables, codes were assigned to responses. Those codes and tables are provided below.

Limitations

Given that the interview questions prompted students to reflect upon their spirituality, the researchers recognize that data may be biased towards a Hawthorne effect. That is, simply because we asked preservice candidates about their spirituality and teaching, they may have thought that it was important for them to have such a connection, with the result being that they might respond to that question affirmatively. Analysis indicated, however, that at least some candidates were unafraid to say that there wasn't any connection between their spirituality and education.

All but one of the preservice teachers in this program were female. While 83.8% of U.S. public school elementary teachers and 87.1% of private school elementary school teachers are female (Strizek et al., 2006), it should be acknowledged that responses here may represent an overwhelmingly female perspective. In order to protect the anonymity of the male student, his responses are not identified in this paper.

In addition, we note that our institution is Catholic. While our analysis of interview responses indicated that the Catholicity of the institution did not seem to influence students' decision to enter teaching, perhaps responses would be different from preservice teachers at a public institution or an institution affiliated with a different religion.

We recognize that this is a small study, but we hope that there is a "universal generalizability" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to, perhaps, other preservice teacher candidates or to more mature teachers. This initial study also informs future research on the connection between spirituality and education.

Findings

Findings are reported here first by responses to interview questions, and then summarized to answer the research question.

Does your own spirituality affect your teaching?

We framed an explicit spirituality-of-teaching question on our interview protocol as one which would most likely provoke a yes-no response so that we would have a straightforward answer. However, students did not answer the question with simple yes-no responses. Table 1 summarizes the responses.

Responses are reported in the table by the number of responses rather than by the number of respondents, because sometimes a student would work through a series

Joanne M. Marshall

of responses. One student, for example, worked her way through “Sort of,” “Yeah,” “I think,” “I don’t know,” “I guess so,” and ended with “So yeah—I guess. That’s a cool question.” Students always followed their yes-no response with additional insight into their thinking. However, even some of these responses required more interpretation. Because of the additional interpretation required, the full response is given so that readers can make their own judgments.

A sample negative response came from a student who said:

No, we’re not Catholic. I’m not really religious, but spirituality is something that’s important to me, but not in a religious way. I don’t really know how to describe it—more like personal development and taking time for myself.

It’s interesting that this student said that no, spirituality doesn’t influence her teaching, but her rationale was that it doesn’t influence it because she’s not Catholic and she’s not religious. But she then said that spirituality is important to her. Thus her rationale for responding “no” seems to be conflated with Catholicity. Perhaps that conflation occurred because the institution is Catholic. Later, when asked how she chose to enter teaching, she explained:

I wanted to do business until my senior year in high school, when I realized that’s not really what I’m called to do and not really something that I really want to do, even. It was more for the money, not personal. And I came to the realization that it’s not money that matters. It’s being—like, my goal in life is just to be happy and try to make this world a better world. And I think teaching is one way to do that. I love kids, and I think it’s just a really important thing in our world.

Thus the student’s rationale for entering teaching contains concepts that the theorists have recognized as spiritual ones: a sense of calling and a goal of making the world a better place.

The most firm negative response came from a student who said, “No, actually, not at all.” Two other students briefly commented that they weren’t religious now,

Table I
Does your own spirituality affect your teaching? By number of responses

Response	Number of responses	Totals
No	2	
Not really, don’t think so, not now	4	6
Yes / yeah	3	
Sort of, think so, guess so, in a way, a little bit, probably, somewhat, I guess	8	11
Don’t know	3	3
Never thought about it	1	1
It has, but hasn’t made it worse	1	1

Describing the Elephant

even though they had been in the past. These students' disconnect between past religious experience and their present experience in the teaching program seems worth following up on in future studies, as another student also said, "To me, my religion is part of my real work decisions...like what I have to do. It's not going to influence me at this point, but up to this point [it has]."

The most firm positive response to the question about spirituality affecting teaching came from a student who said, "Yes, I want to teach in a Catholic school. Growing up, I liked the way they talk about God and stuff in class." This student is clearly equating spirituality with her Catholic religion. Other positive responses, though less firm, included the student who said: "Yeah, in a way." That student went on:

Well, the reason how I knew I really wanted to be a teacher is I've had five knee surgeries, and sports were a huge, huge part of my life. And then I couldn't play them anymore. So then I started at the Catholic grade school, I would ask to be a coach. So I started coaching grade school little kids, high jumpers, sixth graders and stuff. ...So that's how I knew I wanted to do it. So in a way, I call it my calling. I kind of thought of it like something was taken away, it made me notice, like ...realize that that's what I really wanted to do.

This student's response included a rationale for why the student decided to enter teaching, despite the interviewer not asking that question yet. The response also included a reference to "calling," as well as an oblique reference to "something taken away" (sports) by an unidentified actor (perhaps God?) to make the student notice and realize that teaching was what the student really wanted to do.

Remaining responses were in the "don't know" category. As mentioned above, students also responded to this question as if they had instead been asked why they had entered teaching, which was the next interview question.

How Did You Become Interested in Teaching?

When asked how they became interested in teaching, nine respondents (half the group) said immediately that they had always wanted to be a teacher, from the time they were little. Some of them talked about playing school with a parent, younger siblings, neighbors, or dolls. One student, Amanda,¹ described that early desire as a "cliché":

It's one of those clichés, ever since I was little. It's just always been like, "That sounds fun. I get to tell everyone what to do and grade papers, and if I don't like what you're..."—That's when you're a kid. [Now] I just like the whole prospect of being able to touch people's lives, children's lives, in such a way and have such an impact, 'cause I saw how teachers had such an impact on me, whether it was positive or negative. And I wanted to try to erase all the negative ones for all these kids and just try to help and just be there for them.

Embedded in Amanda's response were two other themes that were common responses

Joanne M. Marshall

from other participants: touching lives/making an impact/helping others, and the impact of preservice teachers' own K-12 teachers on them.

In addition to the specific response about wanting to make an impact came responses from two other students with teaching experience who talked about feeling good as a result of knowing that they *had* made an impact. Said one, "Once you know that you've taught somebody something, I think the feeling is amazing—it's amazing, and it makes you feel so accomplished."

Combined with the theme of making an impact was another related response raised by students: the desire to "help others" or "make the world better" or "make a difference." These students all had clear explanations of their decision-making process and how teaching would help them help others. Those explanations are too lengthy to provide all of them here, so this one, from Carol, is offered as an example not only of her desire to help others, but also of one way in which students described their arriving at the decision to teach:

First, I wanted to do everything because you always change your mind a thousand times. But then I decided—I started to think about writing, like journalism, and then I decided—it got kind of hard and stressful just doing it for fun, and I was like, I don't want to do this. So then, I was like, what else am I good at? I was in high school thinking, what else could I possibly do with my life? And I remember when I was in fifth grade we did reading partners, they were in second grade. So I helped this kid and he didn't know how to spell, and I was helping him spell, and then his teacher came up to me and said, "You should be a teacher." And I was like hmm, maybe. I always remember that, and like—maybe I will.

Carol's description of her decision to become an elementary school teacher is also an example of the third common theme: the impact that the student's own teachers had made in inspiring the student to be a teacher, or in directly advising the student to consider teaching. One student, Megan, illustrated the impact a teacher had made on her life by saying that she hadn't had a lot of inspiring teachers. Her kindergarten teacher was inspiring, and she credits that teacher for her own choice of elementary-level teaching. But she spoke most about another teacher:

In high school, I hated math.... But we had this one teacher, Mr. G., and he was really good at teaching what he did, but that wasn't it. Our junior year we had four or five kids by the end of first semester that had died in our school. Yeah, it was really bad. One was suicide, one was heart condition ... we walked into class one day after the one kid that everybody really knew—this had happened.

And instead of just like, a lot of teachers, they didn't know what to do. But he sat down with us, and instead of talking about class, he just talked about—life, and what happens and how to get through it, and he was very religious too, so he brought God up, and I don't think it offended anybody 'cause you know overall everyone has one God. So it was more important to him that we were all okay...like yeah, we'll be one day late in class, that's fine. We can make up our work, but he took the time out to just kind of like—talk to us about it.

... It wasn't every day, but he always had priorities more than just math...

Describing the Elephant

and then if we needed help in math, he was always there to help us out and teach it. So ...I would like to do that, be able to—he gave us some really good advice. He probably doesn't even know I think of him this way... but it was just nice to know that people cared more about us, you know, than instead of just how well we do in math class.

I guess that's why—that's another inspiring thing, I want kids to know that there are people there that really do care about them. ...A lot of my teachers... I felt like I was just there. Like they don't want to bother with me, even though if they worked with me, I know I could have been as smart as the rest of the kids. So I want kids to know that they can all just do it. They can do it.

Megan's two teachers ended up inspiring her not only to choose the grade level at which to teach, but also to care about her students in the same way she felt cared for by them. Even Megan's noninspiring teachers, the ones who "didn't want to bother with me," inspired her to be different from them.

A fourth theme that emerged in response to why preservice teachers enter teaching was that of having previous teaching experience. Half of the respondents talked about knowing they want to teach because they had a powerful experience teaching before coming to college. For five of them that experience was within the context of an explicitly religious setting like Sunday school, but others picked up experience working as teachers' aides or mentors or tutors. The following example reveals how one preservice teacher overcame her initial reluctance to become a teacher because her experience teaching made her feel that she'd made an impact:

I think it was just being that teacher's aide in eighth grade. It crossed my mind a few times of maybe being a teacher, but I was just a little hesitant because I wasn't very good at standing up in front of people and speaking and stuff like that. So when I started off as a teacher's aide, I'd just start off with small jobs like I'd read the gospel in that class and so the kids became familiar with who I was, and then they knew what my job was in that class. And it wasn't until the teacher was going to be sick and rather than getting a sub that the students didn't know, she wanted me to [take the class], so I had a friend come with me, 'cause she knew I knew the routine everyday. It went so well, and the kids were so responsive to me and like, I thought since the real teacher was gone, they'd be out of hand, but they had total respect for me, and that's when I knew. And also for a substitute for the other teacher, they always asked for me to come back. That's when I knew that I had made an impact, and so I always wanted to continue with that.

Besides explicit teaching experience, students also talked about other experiences with children, such as babysitting, coaching, and "always being around kids" in their family. A typical response was, "I've worked with kids forever."

A final thematic reason given for becoming a teacher was the notion of feeling "called." Seven respondents used the word "call" when talking about their decision to teach. Although one respondent gave this call a religious connotation, most of the respondents used the term not as an explicit call-from-God in a traditional religious

Joanne M. Marshall

sense, but as a call in the sense of what felt right to them. Said one, “I feel like my calling, like what I came into this world to do, is to teach.”

Responses to why these preservice teachers decided to become teachers were thus divided into six main themes: They had always wanted to be a teacher; they wanted to make an impact or help others; they were inspired by their own teachers; they were recognized as talented and explicitly advised by their teachers to consider teaching; they had prior teaching experience or experience working with children that confirmed or made them realize that teaching might be a viable career choice; or they felt “called” to teach. Two of these responses, prior experience and advice from their own teachers, show the importance of providing opportunities at the K-12 level for students to work with children in what amounts to an early apprenticeship model.

The confirmation of a teaching role that these opportunities and experiences provided also highlighted students’ other reasons for entering teaching, which were all about internal motivators such as always wanting to teach, wanting to help others, being inspired by other teachers, or feeling called. Those that had experience teaching also talked about feeling personally fulfilled. These reasons are all what Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley (2006) called, rather clinically, “psychological factors,” but they could also be identified as spiritual in nature. They are about finding meaning and purpose and about being connected with others.

What Are the Characteristics of a Good Teacher?

When asked for characteristics of a good teacher, students enumerated 57 different descriptors, ranging from “loves the job” to “energetic” to “is responsible.” Many of these descriptors were combined if the concepts were similar, such as “kind” and “nice.” Themes here are reported by the number of respondents who mentioned them, rather than the number of times the characteristic was mentioned, in order to prevent giving extra voice to respondents who described the same general concept repeatedly. The most frequently mentioned characteristics and the concepts that were grouped with them are listed in Table 2 so that readers can see and evaluate groupings for themselves.

From the table, one can see that there were two characteristics mentioned by the most respondents: caring and effective. However, these two characteristics were not discrete, but often linked and overlapping in students’ responses. Close behind were two other characteristics which also overlapped with being caring and effective: “helps or sees students as individuals” and “students are able to talk to teacher.”

The characteristic of a good teacher mentioned by most respondents, caring, emerged earlier in Megan’s story about Mr. G. Other respondents echoed her, saying, for example, that “You definitely have to care for the kids. It has to be about them because there’s so many different things in their life that could come in the way” or that teachers have to be “Warm and caring, definitely, just like, ‘You can talk to me, about problems or whatever.’”

Describing the Elephant

The second most mentioned characteristic of a good teacher, of being effective, tended to include an emphasis on the pedagogical requirements of good teaching, though students also included affective components such as knowing students as individuals. One student said, for example, that

I think a good teacher has to sit back and watch his or her class because a teacher that teaches a class and then says ‘Okay, let’s go on with the next thing,’ doesn’t take the time to sit down and watch how the class works as a whole, as individuals.

The two ideas of taking time and of getting to know students as individuals surfaced in other interviews as well. Said another student:

I think you have to have a lot of energy and you have to try to figure out what you can do to make kids learn because they’re not gonna all learn the same way, and if

Table 2:
Characteristics of a Good Teacher, by Number of Respondents

Caring (also: warm, has heart)	9
Compassionate, Loves students, People person (same respondent)	
Friend, Affectionate (same respondent)	
Considerate	
Effective	8
Competent	
Professional, Knows content (same respondent)	
Academic, prepared (same respondent)	
Can communicate	
Helps or sees students as individuals	7
Students are able to talk to teacher	7
Listening	
Interacts with kids	
Can relate as person / open (same respondent)	
Understanding	5
Patient	
Takes time for students	4
Be around	
Respectful	4
Open-minded	
Kind	3
Nice	
Energetic	2
Not just academic	2

Joanne M. Marshall

they're not doing well it's not necessarily them doing poorly, so I think the teacher should look at themselves more than they look at how the kid is.

Respondents also mentioned that teachers should be “professional,” “competent,” and “know their content.” These characteristics would make teachers effective, but some students also noted that teaching was not all about academics. One student summarized this point of view by saying good teachers should “be around for the kids whatever they need either academic or a person.” Another said, “It’s beyond the teaching that you have to worry about. It’s dealing with each individual kid.” Never did a student say that good teachers should be just one thing, but listed a series of descriptors, most encompassing both affective and effective components. Good teachers had affective characteristics, such as caring, seeing students as individuals, being able to talk with students, and being understanding. Good teachers were also “effective,” which, while focused more on competency and content, was inseparable from affective characteristics. Affective characteristics, especially the one of care, are spiritual constructs.

Discussion and Implications

What connection, if any, is there between why people enter teaching and the spirituality of teaching?

To return to the research question above, when one compares the content of these students’ responses with the literature on spirituality, it seems that respondents did indeed see a relationship between their decision to teach and the sense of purpose and connectedness that others have referred to as the spirituality of teaching. However, these students don’t seem to have explicitly spiritual language yet. Thus a student said, for example, that her spirituality was “not at all” related to her teaching and then continued that kids are great and she feels amazing and accomplished when she teaches—exactly the kind of spiritual interconnectedness that writers such as Palmer and Lanteri and Dantley discuss. The lack of firmness in most students’ responses, as well as the way some of them worked though an response as they talked, seems to indicate that this might be the first time they have been asked to consider spirituality in relationship to their teaching. This finding is similar to that from research conducted in Australia (Rogers & Hill, 2002), where researchers concluded, as they investigated preservice teachers’ spirituality, that it was difficult for preservice teachers to express themselves about spirituality because they lacked a shared language about that spirituality.

The care and other affective characteristics that students mentioned as characteristics of a good teacher aligned with their previous responses about their purpose in teaching being centered on helping others. It also aligned with other literature which regards teaching as a profession with a moral imperative because teachers are “critical agents in ensuring children’s humanity” (Soder, 1990, p. 74), as a

Describing the Elephant

profession which finds teacher-student interactions rewarding (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986), and as a profession with a spiritual imperative to create “caring communities” (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1996).

Those who write about spirituality and education claim that all teaching is inherently spiritual because of teacher-student interactions. Those interactions “ultimately teach who we are” (P. Palmer, 1998-1999, p. 9) and are invested with moral authority (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990). While the future teachers interviewed in this study did not seem to have the language to talk eloquently about how their spirituality related to their teaching, they did seem to talk about distinctly spiritual concepts. They were clear that their teaching related somehow to their previous experiences. They were clear that their teaching will have and has had a purpose and a meaning, and that they were “called” to do it. They were clear that they are helping students and helping the world to be a better place, and they were clear that the most important characteristic of a good teacher is to know her students and to care for them. Although no one used the exact words that Palmer, Noddings, and other spirituality-in-education writers use to describe spirituality and teaching, the concepts those words represent are present for these students: meaning, purpose, connectedness, and care. Thus they did seem to have internalized a spiritual framework for thinking about their teaching.

Spirituality in the Teacher Education Curriculum

Although these future teachers did seem to have an internalized spiritual framework, they were missing the language to talk about it. The results feel a little like the old story of the blind men and the elephant: students walked around the elephant of teacher spirituality describing one or more of its parts—purpose, connectedness, and care—with understanding the way these parts might come together. How helpful it would be if teacher education programs pointed out that these parts together make up a spirituality of teaching. Since some students seemed to conflate religion with spirituality, either commenting on their own religiosity or their own Catholicity, it might be useful for programs to introduce some of the theoretical base of spirituality and teaching, which deemphasizes particular religious practices and instead emphasizes the connectedness or caring of teaching. Further, at least two respondents mentioned that religion was important to them but that religion could not be addressed in public school, so they were thinking about teaching in a Catholic school. While they are correct that the inculcation of religious values would not be legal or appropriate in a public school, some clarification about what is and is not legal and appropriate in teaching about religion in public schools (Haynes & Thomas, 2002; Marshall, 2003) would probably be helpful to these future teachers.

Some teacher educators, such as Palmer (2003) and Mayes (2001), have already called for including the spirituality of teaching in teacher education curriculum. Palmer, for example, argues that the current era of high stakes accountability creates

Joanne M. Marshall

a spiritual crisis, which must be countered through programs such as the Courage to Teach, which addresses the pedagogy of the soul or “the ontological reality of being human that keeps us from regarding ourselves, our colleagues, or our students as raw material to be molded into whatever form serves the reigning economic or political regime” (p. 378). Mayes makes the connection between the common call for reflective practitioners and preservice programs which encourage future teachers to reflect specifically upon their spirituality, which he claims provides them with greater depth and sensitivity to the needs of their students. Several other theorists suggest that including spirituality in the teacher education program will lead teachers to be more aware of the whole child (Rogers & Hill, 2002), more critical of existing power structures (Dantley, 2005b), more likely to encourage inclusion (Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999), more likely to work for social justice (Hafner & Capper, 2005; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Wallace, 2000), and more prepared for the realities of schooling (Nieto, 2003; Quartz, 2003).

All of these ends are completely consistent with the teacher quality and accountability demanded by the current educational climate, in addition to speaking to the deeper needs of a teacher’s soul, that of meaning and purpose and care for students. A preservice program which paid attention to these deeper needs and encouraged teachers to reflect upon them could reinforce future teachers’ psychological reasons and rationale for entering the profession. In turn, such reinforcement might encourage them to stay in the profession longer, since teachers who believe themselves to be called to teaching or who find their jobs to be satisfying are more likely to stay in them. Ingersoll’s work on teacher retention indicates that 29% of all beginning teachers leave teaching after three years and 39% after five years (2001a, p. 4). High-poverty schools are more likely to lose teachers than low-poverty schools (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001a, p. 5). Teachers leave first because of low salaries. But they do not leave because of organizational effects in their schools such as large class sizes, or lack of time to plan, or lack of community support. Instead they leave because of lack of support from school administration, lack of student motivation, student discipline problems, and lack of teacher influence over decision-making (Ingersoll, 2001a, p. 6). Such deficiencies are ultimately ones that are spiritual in nature, because they are related to finding a meaning and a purpose and to establishing connectedness with administrators and students.

To have a qualified teacher in every classroom, teachers, particularly young teachers, must be willing to stay in the classroom. We might be able to encourage such staying by paying more—a good start—but also by reaching into teachers’ inner core, the desire for meaning and connection that made them want to teach in the first place. According to Farkas et al (2000), 86% of teachers who have been in the classroom fewer than five years say that only those “with a true sense of a calling” (p. 5) should pursue teaching. That calling is obviously not being sustained over time.

Describing the Elephant

Directions for Future Research

One direction for future research is to extend the study here. More research is needed, especially qualitative research, on the meaning and purpose that future and current teachers find in their work. Most work thus far on the retention of teachers has focused on school-level organizational factors rather than individualized “psychological” factors of what makes teachers enter and stay in the profession.

Another direction for future research includes refining interview questions so that participants have the opportunity to define spirituality for themselves and then describe whether—or how—it relates to their teaching. Probing questions should tease out any potential distinctions between spirituality and religion and should try to get teachers to talk more about how their previous experiences in schools might relate to their own desires to teach.

Spirituality is not a touchy-feely ephemeral construct without relation to what happens every day in schools and without relevance to today’s tense climate of accountability. It is instead at the very core of who teachers are and of what sustains their work with students. It is up to teacher educators and educational leaders to understand it and to foster it.

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¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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Joanne M. Marshall

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