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Called to Teach: Interpreting the Phenomenon of Calling as a Motivating Factor

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RENEWING THE OLD PATHS

"Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls..."
Jeremiah 6:16



Called to Teach: Interpreting the Phenomenon of Calling as a Motivating Factor

This is the first of three articles on the topic of the calling to teach. The following two articles will appear in subsequent issues of Life@School®.

ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological study examines the phenomenon of the calling to teach. Nine participants were interviewed, and the dialogue was analyzed for themes uncovered from participants' interpreted experiences. The following themes were revealed: the calling experience as a process, esteem for the teaching profession as a calling, the use of spirituality for affirmation, and the direct impact of spirituality on career choice.

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Many pre-service teachers claim to be motivated by the experience of a "calling." What is this phenomenon and how is it experienced by those entering the teaching profession? The term "calling" is often used by Christians in reference to jobs or tasks taken on in service to God and is often referenced by those who submit to an intrinsic notion of service to others or to the greater good (Elias, 2003). Those who experience a calling to their areas of service acknowledge a pull from an external source, igniting an internal motivation and giving meaning to a career (Duffy, 2006).

With such negative elements as low pay and prestige being attributed to the field of education, there must be motivating factors that lie beyond normal criteria for choosing a career. This study investigates the role spirituality plays in choosing a career in education, with a focus on calling as a motivating factor. It leaves the question open-ended to include any motivating force compelling a person to do something contrary to mainstream decision-making constructs and extrinsic rewards. The extrinsic reward factors are the ones that so many people seem to have a problem looking past when deciding on teaching as a career. It has been stated by Sparks (1988) that people who value extrinsic rewards as motivating factors make poor teachers. Therefore, the intrinsic and altruistic motivation must be explored to understand better what draws teachers into the field.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

This research can assist in better understanding the disposition of teachers in order to bolster public

perception, invigorate teacher recruitment, and better equip teacher training programs. If the phenomenon of calling exists and if it also leads to altruistic professionalism, the field itself can only be elevated by the service-oriented and selfless actions of the "called." Furthermore, as teacher shortages escalate, it becomes increasingly important for recruiters to understand what motivates a person to teach (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Teacher training programs could benefit from this study as colleges of education are held accountable for measuring the dispositions of their candidates. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) holds as one of its objectives to codify "the internal existence of those who desire to become teachers" (McKnight, 2004, p. 212). By NCATE standards, teacher training programs will now be expected to understand the virtues of potential teachers and evaluate these virtues. If some teachers do experience a calling, it would fall under this "virtue ethic" (p. 212).

METHODOLOGY

A calling is not easily observed or described with typical quantitative survey methods. The experience is internal and subjective to the life situation of the person making the decision. Because the subject of this study is an internal phenomenon, hermeneutic phenomenology served as the mode of research. This qualitative approach sought to interpret the complex dynamic of spiritual motivation and the uniqueness of the phenomenon inherent to each person's experience.

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As a research approach, hermeneutic phenomenology is a method of inquiry that provides the ability to study phenomena systematically that are normally difficult to observe or measure (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Hermeneutics “is the theory and practice of interpretation” (van Manen, 1990, p. 179). Phenomenology “is the science of phenomena” (van Manen, p. 183). Hermeneutic phenomenology combines these terms with the idea of interpreting a description of an experience. It seeks to understand and describe someone else’s experience and capture the essence of that experience. A researcher who uses hermeneutic phenomenological methods enters an area of interest with a sense of “wonder” that is “Being-in-the-world, as concern is fascinated by the world” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 88).

Participants

The participants who were interviewed in this research were chosen purposefully for the study. In order to access persons who might have had a spiritual motivation in choosing a career, the participants were students at a private Christian university. Interview procedures were based on van Manen’s (1990) definition of the function of interviewing within hermeneutic phenomenological research:

1. It may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon;
2. The interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 66)

Questions were asked of the participants to begin a dialogue, with the participants being given reign to answer questions and describe their decisions in terms that were relativistic to their own experience. The interview guide below was implemented to direct each interview. At the researcher’s discretion, probing questions were asked to explore further areas of interest relating to the study. Nine participants were interviewed, all female but one.

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about yourself.
 - a. Family
 - b. Age
 - c. Religious affiliation
2. What is your definition of spirituality?
 - a. Prompts might be:
 - i. Formal religion
 - ii. Personal belief system
 - iii. Guiding force
3. Are you familiar with the term “calling”? If so, what is your definition? If not, the definition by Colozzi and Colozzi (2000), is a career that is not motivated

by monetary gain or is for the betterment of society or the good work of a higher power is considered a calling. In essence, it is an occupation that requires some type of sacrifice on the part of the individual.

4. Do you think teaching is a calling? For everyone?
5. Were you called to teach? Can you identify a specific moment?
6. Would teaching be an attractive career if you were not called or there were no spiritual dimension to your decision to teach?
7. Did you always want to be a teacher?
8. Describe your experience when you decided to become a teacher.
 - a. What were the intrinsic factors that influenced you, such as spirituality?
 - b. What were the extrinsic factors that motivated you, such as the schedule of a teacher?
 - c. Which of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors do you think were linked to spirituality?
9. Why do you think some people view teaching as a calling?
10. Would you feel compelled to teach even if you wanted to do something else? Why?
11. Do you think you have always had the disposition and basic skill set to be a teacher?
12. Are others in your family teachers? Did they influence you? Was there any spiritual link there?
13. What are the drawbacks you see to entering the teaching profession?
14. Do you think teaching will be a life-long career for you?
15. Is there anything that I have missed that you would like to add or clarify?

Data Collection

The interviews were audio recorded and later professionally transcribed. In this way, the interview was repeatedly reflected on and analyzed. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview, but they were not copious or comprehensive in order to keep the flow of the interviewing progressing uninterrupted. These handwritten notes were used to help clarify responses and to direct the questioning

Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data within this hermeneutic phenomenological study was based on the approach outlined by Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves (2000, pp. 76-77, 81.) This approach is based on five steps concerning the readings of the data and the writing of the narrative.

1. Analysis actually begins while the interviews are being conducted. The interviewer is actively listening and thinking about the responses and descriptions of the participant. Possible themes are being constructed at this time as well.
2. Careful analysis is made of the data as the researcher

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reads and rereads the data. This phase is called “immersing oneself in the data.” The objective is to develop initial interpretations of the data that will eventually develop themes later in the analysis process. The researcher identifies the prominent characteristics in each interview to this end.

3. This phase includes data reduction. At this point, the researcher decides what is relevant and what is not. The researcher takes the transcripts and organizes within each interview like topics that were discussed by the participant. Digressions or off topic comments can be removed at this time as well as verbal ticks such as “you know.” This allows the text to move in a focused flow without changing the essence of it.
4. Thematic analysis will begin once the researcher has an overall understanding of the text. The researcher will write tentative themes beside phrases or sections of text. These labeled pieces of data from each interview are then grouped together.
5. The final step draws from van Manen’s (1990) concept of writing and rewriting as a critical element of interpretive phenomenology. At this point, the researcher takes the themes as parts and brings them together as a coherent impression of the whole. This is a reflective process.

At the heart of the data analysis process, the Heideggerian (1962) philosophy of “passivity” was followed. This means the researcher was not too aggressive in finding phenomena. The researcher created a “clearing space” in which the phenomenon could render itself known. By Heidegger’s precepts, the phenomenon was already there and had been hidden. It was the job of the researcher to allow it to be revealed. This entailed multiple listenings of the tapes and multiple readings of the text.

RESULTS

After all interviews were transcribed, what Cohen et al. (2000) calls “data transformation” took place. Data transformation is the process of reducing the material to relevant information that applies to the research.

Thematic Analysis

There are four themes that radiate throughout the responses of the participants: the calling experience as a process, esteem for the teaching profession as a calling, the use of spirituality for affirmation, and the direct impact of spirituality on career choice. These themes do not stand alone, but are bound together throughout the dialogue. (All participant names below are pseudonyms.)

The calling experience as a process. The experience of calling in relation to teaching was more a process of tangible and intangible phenomena than a single event. Each felt called, but they—with the exception of Dale, the only male participant—experienced a series of events

over a period of months and even years that they felt directed them to teaching. Dale, on the other hand, held more to a born-to-the-calling philosophy. This process was different than most other careers motivated by salary, family occupations, technical ability, or working conditions.

Esteem for the teaching profession as a calling. The idea that teachers are a special breed of professionals was evidenced by the continued references to service, job stressors, responsibility, sacrifices, and an emotionally demanding environment. Because of this, the participants felt the teaching field requires more of a spiritual foundation than most jobs and this idea also led to the belief by all the participants that a person should be called to teach. However, the negative factors were just a part of the concept that made teaching estimable to the participants. The fact that the participants all had experienced the spiritual process of a calling made the career seem more distinguished and to an extent more righteous than other careers. In their minds, what could be more virtuous than a God ordained career?

The use of spirituality for affirmation. Once the calling was accepted by the participants, the spiritual basis for their decision became the foundation on which the participants readied themselves for their career. Confidence was gained from the feeling that their chosen career was not their choice alone but that they were chosen. In times of struggle this became a supporting and encouraging factor for the participants. In times of doubt this became the compass by which they navigated through their reservations. This spiritual dynamic in the decision process was not only a catalyst but a sustaining element after the decision was made. Many of the participants also anticipated that their spirituality would sustain them when they began teaching and ran into difficulties.

The direct impact of spirituality on career choice. Within the interlacing network of the dialogue, spirituality was the common thread that connected everything and is at the core of the participants’ experiences. Three of the participants identified spirituality as being responsible for half of their rationale for choosing teaching as a career. The other six participants gave much more credit, if not all the credit, to spirituality’s role. This was not limited to decision-making alone. It also included the belief that there was a spiritual aspect to the imbueing or acquiring of skills and dispositions that were to be used as a teacher. Therefore, spirituality played a direct role in influencing the participants into the teaching profession, preparing them for the profession, and sustaining them once they began their jobs.

Overwhelmingly the participants believed that spirituality was the main reason they are becoming

teachers, and without it, it was unlikely that they would have chosen that career. There would be a huge void in the decision-making construct of the participants and in the foundation of emotional support if spirituality were removed from the equation. It was difficult for most, and impossible for some, to separate any of the aspects of their career from spirituality. For some of the participants, it appeared even more apparent to them as they neared the end of their training.

The uniqueness of each of the participants and the varied experience they each brought to the study helped to validate the themes that have been uncovered. This is due in large part to the similar responses that were given to many of the questions.

DISCUSSION

The spiritual dynamic seems to add a greater sense of commitment to the teaching career. Without a spiritual catalyst or calling, would a person really be right for teaching in today's world of education that is ever increasing in its demands? It becomes increasingly difficult to understand why individuals would enter the teaching profession without some kind of intrinsic force driving and sustaining them. This is assuming that they undertake the job with a sense of commitment and apply themselves to doing their best. Educators become enveloped by the job when they are truly committed to it. It becomes a righteous and virtuous vocation because the extrinsic rewards rarely balance out the amount of self that is given over to the job.

With teacher accountability at an all time high and

respect from the public at an all time low, it makes one question why anyone would want to enter such a tumultuous and challenging field. It also raises the question whether or not people can enter the profession and succeed if they do not have some type of spiritual milieu from which they are operating. Would a teacher be a good hire if he or she were in the profession because of the schedule, benefits, ease of finding a job, time off with kids, or a desire to coach a sport? The job is too demanding emotionally and physically to validate any of these rationales and expect the teacher to make a difference in the lives of his or her students.

It is recommended that teacher training institutions examine the spiritual aspect of those who choose teaching as a career, at least in a general sense as relating to calling and vocation. There is no end in sight to the increases in teacher accountability and the high expectations of parents. Therefore, teaching must be set aside and distinguished as a career of principle and commitment. This cannot be accomplished with increases in salary, benefits, or loan forgiveness programs. It must be accomplished in the essence of the job and in what constitutes a devoted teacher.

It has been evidenced through the years that increased oversight, greater spending, and more accountability have had little or no impact on improving student achievement. The single most influential means of affecting change is the teacher, so it is more important than ever to understand the context from which prospective teachers are entering training. Spirituality must be factored in as a part of the sustainability of the new teacher.

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