

UNPACKING RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS IN TEACHING:
CHRISTIAN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' NARRATIVES OF
CALLING, LOVE, AND RELATIONSHIPS

by

KIMBERLY REBECCA LOGAN

(Under the Direction of Jennifer Hauver James)

ABSTRACT

This is a study about the intersection of religion and teaching in the lives of four undergraduate pre-service teachers. Surprisingly little research exists on how religious beliefs influence students in teacher education settings, yet many education students identify as religious and feel *called to teach*. This research contributes to the literature by examining the influence of religion and calling in the lives of Christian women as they complete their student teaching semester at a public university. Narrative inquiry is used to understand the ways these women make sense of the world through the lens of their Christian faith. Their stories reveal the complexity of what calling means and the ways religious understandings influence approaches to students and to the teaching profession. In the end, I argue that the question is not *if* religion matters to teacher education, but *how* it matters—and how teacher educators can create spaces to talk about, honor, and yet question and investigate the role of religious understandings to teachers and students.

INDEX WORDS: Christian pre-service teachers, Religious belief and teaching, Teacher education, Religious identity, Teaching and calling

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B.A., Pepperdine University, 1991

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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August 2014

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents and to Thomas
for your love, support, and patience throughout this process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“All right, all right, all right!”

Matthew McConaughey

Academy Award Acceptance Speech, 2014

Since the acknowledgements section seems to be my nerd equivalent of an Oscar acceptance speech, I thought I would begin with that quotation from McConaughey—as he eloquently summarizes my excitement at this time. Completing my PhD took longer than I expected, and there were many who helped me along the way—so here we go...

First, my parents, Charles and Mildred Logan—who encouraged me, housed me, tolerated me, and took care of my son on many occasions. I am incredibly grateful and love you both. Without your support, I certainly would not have been able to complete this degree. To my son, Thomas—who rarely complained when I raced off to a night class or retreated to my room to work. You continuously teach (and entertain) me with your insightful wit and understanding of the world. I love you and am honored to be your Mom. To my friend, Eva—I have no idea what I would do without you. Thanks for being the perfect audience, tirelessly listening, laughing, and sometimes warring on my behalf. To my undergraduate professor, Michael Gose—who always believed in my ability as a scholar. You have challenged and supported me for two decades now and make me want to emulate your Obi-Wan ways.

To Jenn James—for the many conversations that furthered my thinking and helped me understand that there was indeed a study here. Thank you for your patience and time, generous and thoughtful notes, and insightful input. I *deeply* appreciate your willingness and effort to bring me up and along. To Todd Dinkelman—taking your classes as a master’s student caused me to believe I had chosen the right scholarly path, and your teaching has had a significant impact (yes, *impact*) on how I view teacher education. To Ajay Sharma—for your critical input delivered with appreciated kindness, support, and consideration.

To Mardi Schmeichel—my PhD therapist and guide. Send me your bill. I hope you take student insurance. To all my fellow doctoral students who helped me along the way—Charles, Brandon, Alex, Joseph, and Shujuan. I am grateful you were there at the start. And to the many faculty and other graduate students I had the privilege to learn from within the department.

I have wondered if it is appropriate in this section to also thank God for helping me in this process. If rumbling and rambling constitute prayer, I prayed continuously. And I am grateful for the help, grace, and patience.

Finally, to the four women who allowed me into their lives during an incredibly busy time. To Amy, Mary, Sarah, and Olivia—a big, heartfelt, *thank you*. I will forever be grateful for your willingness, courage, and kindness in helping me with this work.

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CHAPTER 1

THE STUDY

“Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously we teach who we are”
(Hamachek, 1999, p. 209).

My interest in teachers’ religious understandings began from my own experiences, questions, and navigations of faith. I grew up in the Deep South where my family regularly attended a Christian Baptist church; altar calls, revival meetings, and attempts to sit still in a pew were a consistent part of my childhood. I remember our pastor’s concern when I left at the age of eighteen to attend college in California. Off I went across the country, leaving the familiarity of my small town, middle-class, Baptist bubble. After college, I remained in California and began attending a nondenominational church that expanded my views on Christianity and spirituality. Over time, my theological beliefs have evolved, but throughout my journey of faith, the concept of purpose (“God’s will” or “calling”) has been continually on my mind, generating questions in both my personal and professional life.

After a corporate job ended, I decided to become a substitute teacher, which led to my career change into the field of education. I eventually moved back to the South to complete my master’s degree in education and entered the world of academia at a large, public institution. When I began my education program, I had just ended a period of substantial church involvement. At times, I found the transition to academia unsettling, and there were moments when I felt my religious beliefs needed to be hidden within my new academic environment—fearing being misunderstood or viewed as ignorant or closed-minded. I was learning how to negotiate my religious identity in this new context.

Years later I entered a doctoral program at the same university, and as a graduate teaching assistant, had education students of my own. In the fall of 2011, one of my undergraduate students, Heidi¹, shared how her Christian beliefs had created challenges for her within her education program. I wondered how she was coping with her student teaching semester and e-mailed her to offer support. Below is a portion of her reply²:

Hey Kim,

Well to be honest I am struggling! This is a lot harder than I thought it would be and I am always emotionally and even physically strained. I think I have so much going through my head all the time:

Is this really for me? Is this my calling? Is this really what I want to do with my life? Will it be better when I have my own classroom or will I always struggle so much? What's the point?

The articulation of her struggle was not unexpected. I had encountered other Christian students who wrestled with issues of purpose during student teaching. Certainly a non-religious student could have written this e-mail. However, I understood from our conversations that Heidi considered teaching a vocation and an extension of her faith. These questions were interwoven with her religious beliefs, and I wondered how she and other students mediated their religious identity within the context of their work.

Heidi's e-mail relayed her desire for clarity as she wrestled with significant life and identity questions. Specifically, what caught my attention was her mention of *calling*. Was teaching her calling? Since she associated calling with her religious beliefs and mission, this was

¹ Pseudonym

² Excerpt included with permission.

no small question. For her, student teaching was a critical time that would provide answers. How could I best support her, and what did *calling* really mean to her?

This study stems from my desire to understand how religious student teachers define and think about teaching as a calling. It is the story of four student teachers who consider their Christian faith a significant part of their life and their teaching. All of the participants were early childhood³ education majors at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States, self-identified as Christians, and viewed teaching as a calling or felt called to teach. I focus on how their Christian faith influences their thoughts on teaching, teacher education, teaching practice, and their understanding of their future in the field of education. Their life experiences inform their views, as do the contexts in which they study and teach. These women's stories demonstrate the complexity and messiness of viewing teaching as a calling.

In this first chapter, I describe the goals of this interpretive study which include: to better understand what calling means to religious education students; to examine how a student's religious faith influences her experiences within teacher education and during the student teaching semester; and to provide a space where the experiences and beliefs of these women are valued and serve as a source of knowledge. I then describe myself as a researcher, how my background influences this work, and why I chose narrative inquiry as a method of study.

Goals of the Study

Calling and Teaching

Viewing *teaching as a calling* is nothing new in the field of education, even John Dewey described teaching as a "moral and spiritual calling" (Stack, 2007, p. 167), and today's teachers still identify with the term (Farkas, Johnson, Foleno, Duffett, & Foley, 2000; Hartwick, 2007; Helm, 2006; Mayes, Mayes, & Sagmiller, 2003). A "spiritual calling" is not necessarily

³ In this context, early childhood means prekindergarten to grade five.

“religious” (Holloway, 2005, p. 145); yet calling is often associated with religious tradition (Swezey, 2009), and research (Joldersma, 2006; Gordon, 1993; Mayes et al., 2003; Whitbeck, 2000) indicates religious beliefs influence the sense of calling for many teachers and education students. Many feel God has *called* them to teach (Gordon, 1993; Hartwick, 2007; Mayes et al., 2003; Whitbeck, 2000). This finding can be connected with other research indicating the field of education attracts religious students. According to Kimball, Mitchell, Thornton, and Young-Demarco (2009), “highly religious people seem to prefer Education majors” and once they enter Education majors, “stay in them and become more religious” (p. 22), and Slater (2008) claims “teachers seem more religious than other Americans” (p. 49). If Education is indeed a “safe haven for the religious” (p. 22), it is not surprising many teachers and education students refer to teaching as a calling (Hartwick, 2007; Mayes et al., 2003). For some education students, teaching is not just their future occupation, but their vocation. Yet little research exists on how religious beliefs influence students within teacher education.

Identity, Faith, and Teaching

Scholars examine categories of teacher identity such as race, gender, and social class (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Jones, 2009; McDonald, 2007) while religious identity is often overlooked. Nelson (2010) states, “A review of the literature suggests that the education profession does not consider religion and religious identity very important in the educational journals or educational conferences” (p. 352). Of the sessions at the American Education Research Association (AERA) conference, only “one-half a percent to a tenth of a percent” (p. 352) of them relate to religion and education. According to Burke and Segall (2011), “Much like Whiteness prior to the mid-1990s, the impact of religion on educational practices has, by and large, been a neglected topic in educational literature ...” (p. 633).

But some (Levesque & Guillaume, 2010; Mayes et al., 2003; White, 2009) argue teacher education should address religion. At the core of this argument is the belief that teachers cannot keep personal and professional identities separate (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Danielewicz, 2001; Glanzer & Talbert, 2005). Therefore, the work of teacher education turns in part on the identities pre-service teachers bring to programs, as well as the identities they develop while learning to teach. Religious belief may influence identity and play a significant role in how pre-service teachers experience and interpret teacher education programs. The import of religious beliefs becomes more salient as students increasingly identify as religious (Macdonald & Kirk, 1999) and integrate their religious and teaching identities. According to teacher educators Macdonald and Kirk:

When students have been invited to introduce themselves to peers in class, some have stated their name and added “and I am a Christian.”... What seems to us to be the growing visibility of students’ religious beliefs in their engagements with professional and curriculum issues has presented itself as a new challenge in our work as teacher educators and stimulated our interest as researchers. (p. 131)

These challenges may include religious students feeling unprepared, or unable, to reconcile religious and teaching identities (James, 2011; Nelson, 2010) sometimes resulting in tension within their education programs (James, 2010; Macdonald & Kirk, 1999).

This problem of negotiating identities may be compounded by a lack of discussion around religious beliefs. White (2009) argues some education students want to discuss religion, but do not have the space to do so. As a student she “took issue with the fact that religion was silenced in a class where we were openly encouraged to deconstruct how notions of race, socio-economic class, gender, and sexual orientation impacted teaching and public schools” (p. 857).

White found the topic of religion relegated to talk about public schools and the separation of church and state, not about how religion may impact teacher identity. She argues, “We need to know more about how teachers’ own religious positioning impacts their learning to teach and pedagogical enactment in the classroom” (p. 864).

One way to understand the influence of religious beliefs in the process of learning to teach is by examining issues of identity during the student teaching semester. Student teaching is a critical time in the development of teacher identity (Britzman, 2003; Trent, 2010; Vélez-Rendón, 2010) and can bring up issues of mission and purpose (Korthagen, 2004). For religious students, questions may arise regarding how they will reconcile their religious and teaching identities. If they feel *called to teach*, this may be their first experience wrestling with what that calling will look like. Student teaching is an optimal time to investigate the meaning of calling and was the context for my study.

As stated, the field of education attracts religious students (Kimball et al., 2009) and many feel God has called them to teach (Mayes et al., 2003). Personal and professional identities are not easily separated (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Danielewicz, 2001; Glanzer & Talbert, 2005) and learning to teach involves the negotiation of these identities; it is a time “when one’s past, present, and future are set in dynamic tension” (Britzman, 2003, p. 31). Surprisingly little research exists on how religious belief influences students in teacher education settings, and the meaning of calling for education students has been largely ignored. This research contributes to the literature by examining the influence and meaning of religion and calling for education students; important to understand since the field of education attracts religious students (Kimball et al., 2009), yet little is known about their experiences learning to teach.

Learning from Other’s Experiences, Voices, and Stories

Narratives help us understand others’ experiences and the ways individuals make sense of the world. The participants’ stories provide insight into how they interpret and understand *calling* and their religious understandings through the lens of their past, present, and future. Parker Palmer argues for the use of teachers’ stories believing narratives can portray “ideas and theories that otherwise remain vague and elusive” (Fraser, 2007, p. 293). Scott (2001) also supports this belief calling narrative “an access point for spiritual experience and understanding because of its qualities of indirectness, implication, ambiguity and its suggestive capacity” (p. 120). I use the stories of these women as a way of knowing. By creating a space for their voices to be heard, the reader can access understanding and meaning behind language such as “calling.” Many education students may indeed be religious and view teaching as a calling, but how do these views influence their experiences in their courses and their teaching once in the field? To understand the influence and import of being *called to teach*, first there must be clarification regarding the beliefs behind this statement. It is through these women’s stories that understanding can begin to occur.

My Story

As a qualitative researcher, I am aware that I bring myself to the research. As stated, my interest in teachers’ religious understandings began from my own journey and questions as I navigated my Christian identity in a graduate school context. As I progressed through my education coursework, I met others doing the same—seeking to reconcile their academic and spiritual identities. Some felt hesitant to let their religious beliefs be known and felt judged, even othered, because of their religion. However, I also met religious students who felt completely comfortable and accepted within this same context.

For me, within this academic context, I divulged my religious Christian identity to people I grew to trust. At times it felt like I was confessing a secret or even a warning, letting them know with whom they were associating, fearing a *Godfather*-like response: “Why didn’t you say you worked for Corleone?” Except my Corleone was Jesus. Years later, this seems hard for even me to understand. Perhaps that is a testament to the thoughtful people I have grown to know, or simply speaks to the angst within my journey of self-discovery. At any rate, in the beginning of my academic study, my Christian identity was often at the forefront of my mind.

My past experiences led me to this research with certain understandings and commonalities with the women in my study. I knew the Christian “language” they spoke and was familiar with many of the ministries, teachings, and churches they mentioned during the interviews. I understood their desire for meaning in relationship to their religious faith and could appreciate how they sometimes struggled to find the words to best describe their religious views. At times I wanted to counsel them like a pastor. Other times I wanted to counsel them as a teacher educator. And sometimes I simply wanted to talk with them as a friend, not as a researcher. With my qualitative coursework fresh in my mind, I refrained from acting on any of those impulses, but I took note of how our conversations reminded me of my own journey. I valued learning how they defined and reconciled calling, religious beliefs, and teaching. By telling their stories, I provide a way to better understand how religious beliefs and a sense of calling influenced these pre-service teachers.

Narrative Inquiry

“If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we *should* value the narrative” (Richardson as cited in Butler-Kisber, 2010, pp. 62-63).

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and beliefs of the participants. Narrative inquiry is “a way of understanding experience” and is “stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). My use of narrative methodology draws from Clandinin and Connelly’s “narrative view of experience” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 46) situated in the work of John Dewey (1938) and his pragmatic philosophy:

For Dewey, experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in social context.... Furthermore, Dewey held that one criterion of experience is *continuity*, namely, the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2)

In this study, the participants’ stories are viewed through this narrative lens, as both personal and social.

The 3-Dimensional Space of Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) developed a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space that allows for the examination of participants’ experiences as they look “inward and outward,” “backward and forward,” and locate “them in place” (p. 54). According to Clandinin and Connelly:

By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality—

past, present, and future.... [and] place ... attends to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes. (pp. 50-51)

For example, *looking inward* was addressed through questions about my participants' reflections on teaching as a calling and *looking outward* was addressed through questions about how they acted upon that belief and definition. Questions addressing my participants' experiences *looking backward* focused on their personal histories that influenced their definitions and meanings. These questions focused on their upbringing, family, and religious histories. Questions addressing *looking forward* focused on their understanding of how their meaning of calling will influence their future classrooms. *Locating them in place* focused on experiences and interactions that contributed to or hindered their ability and will to act upon what it means for teaching to be a calling. These dimensions were not discrete and sometimes overlapped, but helped structure my questions in a way that examined the different influences and ways the participants' views on calling surfaced in their lives and teaching.

Research Questions

The main research question was: *How do religious student teachers define and think about teaching as a calling, and how do their religious meanings and perspectives influence their experiences in the context of their work at a public university?* My subsidiary questions addressed the dimensions of this 3-D space defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). They were as follows:

Table 1

Subsidiary Research Questions

Dimension of Space	Subsidiary Research Question
Backward	In what ways have teacher education students' life experiences contributed to their understanding and meaning of teaching as a calling?
Forward	How do student teachers' understanding and meaning of calling contribute to how they view their evolving roles as teachers?
Inward	In what ways do student teachers reflect upon and define the implications of their understanding of teaching as a calling?
Outward	How do student teachers understand and act on the various messages they receive about what it means for teaching to be a calling?
Situated in place	What contributes to or hinders an education students' ability and will to construct for themselves and act upon what it means for teaching to be a calling?

These questions were designed to address the goal to understand how religious students construct and define teaching as a calling and also how their religious understandings influenced their thoughts on teaching and their roles as teachers—as their views on calling and teaching were influenced by their religious faith.

The Four Women: Amy, Mary, Sarah, and Olivia

All of my participants were early childhood education majors at a large, public university in the South, and all self-identified as Christians. Even though my study was designed to incorporate students from different faith traditions, the research sample resulted in participants who solely identified as Christians. Therefore, “religious” students became more accurately, “Christian” students. Additionally, even though I did not intend to recruit only Caucasian females, that ended up being the case. When asked to describe what someone would need to

understand to “know” them, all listed their Christian faith as an important part of that knowing. One of my questions on the “Identity and Calling Questionnaire” (see Appendix A) stated, “Think about meeting people for the first time. You want to tell them about yourself so that they’ll really know you. What would you tell them first, second, third?” All of my participants mentioned their Christian faith in their answers to this question, although the order varied. Table 2 shows how they self-identified when it came to their religious affiliation or identification. Their answers varied from “follower of Jesus” to specific protestant denominations like Methodist or Baptist, and one participant simply wrote, “Christian.”

Table 2

Background Information on the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Student Teaching Assignment	Ethnicity	Religious Identification
Amy	22	Fifth Grade Small, rural community	Caucasian	Follower of Jesus/ Christian
Mary	22	First Grade Small, rural community	Caucasian	Christian
Sarah	21	First Grade Small, rural community	Caucasian	Christian/Methodist
Olivia	22	Fifth Grade Small, rural community	Caucasian	Christian/Baptist

As Table 2 reveals, the participants were all in their early twenties and traditional undergraduate students completing their senior year of college. My interviews took place during their student teaching semester beginning with questions surrounding their personal histories. We discussed their views on calling and the intersection of their Christian beliefs and teaching in subsequent interviews. However, it was the initial interviews that quickly revealed the influence of Christianity in their lives, and it is from this context—these first meetings—that I begin the conversation of the import of religious understandings in the lives of these pre-service teachers.

Amy

I first met Amy on a Sunday morning at a local coffee shop that had been converted from an old car dealership. It was an unusual space with a wall of windows and a large open room that previously accommodated cars on display. Upstairs was a conference room, perhaps originally used for negotiating sticker prices, but for us served as a quiet place to talk. When we scheduled our first meeting, I realized we attended the same nondenominational church and wondered if that would be awkward for either of us. I immediately felt a kinship with Amy and found her to be outgoing and friendly. During the initial interview, I often felt I was bombarding her with personal questions. Yet, Amy answered them all, telling me about her childhood and experiences leading up to her career in education.

Amy described living in Minnesota and Massachusetts before her family moved to the South when she was six. She had one sibling, a sister two years her elder, and described her family as active and concerned with health and nutrition. Amy's father was a microbiologist; her mother a clinical research nurse. She described her parents as "really hard workers" who were "always very available" and supportive of her. Amy called her father's side of the family "very, very conservative," but clarified that her immediate family was not *as* conservative as her father's. When asked about her definition of "conservative," Amy described a culture that discouraged "things like lying and cussing and drinking and having sex with anybody before you're married," and stated she was raised in a house where these types of morals were important. She wanted to be clear it was not just being told what *not* to do, but how to make "wise choices" and "how to handle relationships" with integrity.

Amy attended public schools until junior high when she switched to a private Christian school affiliated with the Church of Christ. Her family however, attended a Methodist church,

which Amy liked because it was not as “exclusive” as other Christian denominations and “just very accepting of lots of different people.” Church was her family’s community, a place where she and her parents developed friendships.

She described her Christian religious beliefs in terms of her personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Amy was not comfortable with the term “religion” because her faith was about her *relationship* with God, not about what she called “the more legalistic things of the church.” She spoke of a transformative Christian faith, a faith that affected her daily life by her “striving to be more Christ-like” and “live in a manner the same way that He [Christ] did.” Amy attended church regularly, served in the children’s ministry, had assumed leadership roles in a university campus ministry, and attended several Christian small groups.

Amy first considered a teaching career while in high school and described enjoying school and wanting to provide a similar positive experience for her students. She decided to pursue a degree in early childhood education during her freshman year of college. Amy had initially pursued a degree in science education, but ultimately felt a content specific education degree was not the right choice for her. She also had considered an undergraduate degree in gifted education, but the university did not offer such a degree, so early childhood became her program of study.

Amy’s desire to become a teacher came from what she viewed as her strengths and her desire for relationships with others. She said, “I feel like I’m gifted in leading and teaching, but then I also really love people...so even if it’s not kids that I teach my whole life, I could see myself teaching other ages too.”

Mary

Mary arrived for our first meeting at the same coffee shop a bit overwhelmed. She was currently training a guide dog named Coco, a large, black, curly-haired poodle, who had just gotten sick in her car. I helped her find paper towels and napkins as she apologetically cleaned up the mess. Mary's dark wavy hair seemed fitting for Coco's trainer, as they looked like they belonged together. We soon settled in to talk as Coco rested at Mary's feet. I found it easy to talk with Mary, as she was outgoing and forthright.

Mary described growing up in a Southern suburb with her parents and two brothers. She considered herself a "very family oriented person" and said the members of her family were all "very close." Her father was a self-employed business owner; her mother worked in the home. She was grateful for her parents' positive relationship with each other and described their marriage as a great role model for any couple. In fact, marriage was very much on Mary's mind, as she was engaged and would marry over the Thanksgiving break at the end of her student teaching.

Mary's school history included both public and private schools. She attended public schools in elementary and high school, but during her middle grade years attended three different private, Christian schools. The years at the Christian schools were "okay" for Mary, but she said the schools did not accommodate her brothers' learning needs, so her family was not pleased with these schools. Even though Mary had always enjoyed school, her brothers had not, and she was very aware of the import of a teacher's response to students who struggled in the classroom.

Throughout her education, Mary described "loving" school saying, "I loved everything about it." Mary's background included experience babysitting and tutoring; she enjoyed being around children, and her mother told her she had a natural ability to teach. She first considered a

career in teaching in middle school, but it was an elective in high school that gave her the opportunity to regularly observe an elementary classroom. Mary decided then that she would become an elementary teacher.

She had begun her undergraduate education degree at a different state college, but was unhappy with the program. Frustrated with life, and searching for meaning and direction, Mary decided to take six months off from college and attend a ministry training school in Australia. She described asking God for direction and felt like she received it once in Australia because “everything” she was assigned to do at the ministry school involved children or schools. During this time abroad, she decided that if her transfer application to her current early childhood program was accepted, she would view it as direction from God and would continue on to become a teacher.

Mary also described her Christian religious beliefs in terms of her relationship with Jesus Christ. She had attended the same church since she was seven, a non-denominational Christian church with a Wesleyan influence. Ministry had a strong influence in her family: her maternal grandparents were pastors; her youngest brother planned to become a pastor; her Dad led a men’s group at her church; and Mary said she was “really involved” with her church. Her eldest brother, who was married with a young child, still lived close by and attended church with the rest of the family every Sunday. She worshipped and prayed regularly and had participated in a foreign mission organization that included “discipleship training.” Mary stated:

... I look to God for plans, I look to God for help.... I guess my relationship with Him, with Jesus is just like a part of me in my everyday life just because I—I pray all the—not all the time obviously because you can’t pray 24/7—well, you could, but I don’t. But I

guess it's just like a normal thing for me to be like, "Okay God, I really need help with this."

During our first meeting, Mary started talking about calling without my prompting, stating she felt teaching was a calling on her life and that God wanted her to teach. She did not yet know how she would incorporate her faith into her teaching, saying she knew she could not talk about her faith in public schools. Mary hoped her love for her students would reveal Christ through her everyday actions.

Sarah

Sarah and I met at the entrance of the College of Education building late on a Thursday afternoon. She was going to a campus ministry meeting later that evening and preferred we meet on campus. It was a warm day so we decided to sit outside to talk, and minutes into our conversation a chorus of tree frogs loudly announced their presence. As we discussed whether or not we could talk over the noise, the frogs decreased their volume. We then resumed our conversation, and seemingly on cue, the chorus rose to a crescendo again. Realizing our defeat, we went inside to my office and began again.

Sarah struck me as a soft-spoken and reserved young woman and did not seem as outgoing as my first two participants. She provided more succinct answers to my questions. Her initial shyness eventually disappeared as I got to know her, but during our first visit I felt I was placing her in an awkward position by asking her personal questions. Sarah was thoughtful in her responses and came across as trustworthy. I had this sense because of the way she listened carefully, considered each question, and her overall demeanor that gave the impression that she was kind.

Sarah grew up in a Southern suburb, attended public schools, and lived in the same county all of her life. She had three brothers, including a twin. Sarah and her twin were the eldest children, but she stated she was really a middle child since her brother was born 34 minutes before her, something her brother never let her forget. She described being close with her brothers and said her family was “very Christian based.” They had attended a Methodist church since she was an infant and always attended church on Sundays and Wednesday nights. Church attendance was important to her family and an integral part of them being a part of a community of believers.

Sarah called her Christian faith “the core” of her family and described her religious beliefs as:

... what gets me up in the morning and what makes it worthwhile for me to get through the day because without it, I don't feel like there would be any real reason or joy to life. I'd just feel empty if I didn't have my faith.

Sarah's religious practice included prayer, reading the Bible, and being a leader in a campus ministry organization. In a later interview, she used the example of the Christian cross to explain her faith and its influence on her life. The vertical axis represented her connection with God and “doing stuff for Him;” the horizontal axis represented her relationships with others and “just being a good example for them, not shoving stuff down their throat;” and the center symbolized her personal relationship with God.

Sarah described having a positive outlook on her past schooling experiences. She affectionately called her mother, a former kindergarten teacher, her role model and went on to say that once she started school, all of her teachers were her role models. She never had a doubt that she would be an elementary teacher one day.

Sarah jokingly said she did not have a choice when it came to universities. Her parents, both alumni, were devoted fans of the university, and Sarah felt that allegiance as well. She knew she wanted to focus on early childhood education and began making plans for her classes during freshman orientation. Sarah described wanting to teach because of her love of children and her belief that “teachers in the younger grades are really the ones that are really going to help those students out for the rest of their lives.” She wanted to “put a passion for learning and a love for life in the minds of the little ones” and be “that compassionate teacher in their lives.”

Olivia

I first met Olivia at the elementary school where she was completing her student teaching, the setting for all but one of our meetings. When Olivia came to the school’s front office to meet me, I observed how she already seemed to be a natural part of the school community. There was something immediately reassuring about her. She seemed sweet and kind and had a no nonsense way about her that seemed fitting for an elementary classroom. I felt she was a little nervous during our first meeting, which was appropriate since she did not know me. I grew to appreciate her pauses and questions as she thoughtfully clarified and considered my questions.

Olivia grew up attending public schools, first in a Southern metropolitan suburb and then in a nearby rural community. She was the eldest child in her family and had one brother who was a senior in high school. Her parents, high-school sweethearts, had just celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Olivia’s father was a police officer, and her mother worked in human resources. She described her family as “really close” and explained her parents were “really involved” in her life growing up. It was clear her family was a significant part of her life, and she described missing them “equally” since being apart from them to attend college.

The Baptist church was a big part of her childhood, as attendance and participation were priorities in her family. Olivia explained the degree of her family's commitment through a story about a softball team when she was in elementary school. Olivia wanted to be a part of a travel team, but many of the games were played on Sundays. Her parents wanted Olivia to understand the priority of church attendance and their faith, and would not allow her to miss church for softball. After talking with her parents, Olivia's coach allowed her to play on the team, allowing for the Sunday absences. In the end, Olivia's commitment to softball centered around a team that did not require play on Sunday; she only participated in the travel team for one season.

Olivia also described her Christian faith as a part of her everyday life, calling it what she "clings on to." She stated:

I think to me, my beliefs really do get me through a lot of hard times, a lot of challenges, a lot of even good times. Because it'll be something you praise, if something great or a blessing happens in your life, then I'll go, and I'll praise God for that, because I know it may not have been something I really did to deserve—or didn't have all these steps leading up to it, it just seems like it happened. And so those are extra blessings that I'm thankful for and to me, that is something God is doing, it's not just out of nowhere. I don't believe in coincidence ...

Olivia was a leader in a campus ministry organization and frequently went on mission trips. She went every spring break while in college and stated, "I just love the opportunity to get to help people."

Olivia said she "wanted to be a teacher since as long as I can remember" and that she "loved being around kids." At times, Olivia considered becoming a veterinarian or possibly a pharmacist, but said she would always return to her desire to teach. Her love for her English

classes in high school led her to enter the university as an English education major, but she took her first English course in college and “hated it.” Around the same time she took her first education course and had a field experience tutoring young children. She decided to “revamp” and go into early childhood education.

Summary

These brief introductions quickly reveal the import of Christianity in these women’s lives. As outlined in this chapter, the primary goal of this dissertation was to understand what viewing *teaching as a calling* means to education students and how their religious understandings influenced their views and experiences within teacher education at a public university. The women’s narratives provide insight to how their personal and professional lives overlapped.

In chapter two, *Conversations in the Literature*, I explore research relevant to this conversation surrounding religious understandings, identity, and teaching. I begin with literature that explores *why* teacher identity matters—why the field of education should consider an education student’s experiences and narratives. I end with research surrounding the intersection of religious beliefs and teaching, specifically looking at the influence of religious understandings on Christian pre-service teachers.

In chapter three, *Methodology*, I further explain narrative inquiry as a method and a methodology. I also describe my subsidiary research questions, discuss the context of the study, and my means of data collection and analysis. This chapter includes how I use Deborah Britzman’s (2003) notion of cultural myths or “inherited discourses” (p. 26) to think about and explore the prevailing narratives at work in the participants’ storytelling.

In chapter four, *Called to Teach*, I explore how each woman's construct of calling influenced her views regarding purpose in teaching. The complexity of calling is revealed in the different meanings ascribed to the word and in the ways the women described varying levels of calling. I raise the question of the usefulness of the word "calling" and explore its connection to gendered discourses surrounding the role of primary teachers in schooling.

Chapter five, *Relationships and Teaching*, details how the women viewed teaching through a relational lens—including a focus on loving and serving others. This chapter highlights how their Christian views on relationships influenced their relationships at their elementary schools. Their personal and professional identities could not be separated—as loving others through the lens of their faith—was consistently on their minds.

Chapter six, *Jesus and Rainbows*, describes the religious homogeneity within the participants' education cohort. Despite opportunities to share their religious beliefs in some teacher education settings, there was limited critical discussion surrounding the intersection of religious beliefs and teaching. Three of the women expressed a desire for more information and a space to talk about how to navigate private religious beliefs in a public school setting.

Finally, in chapter seven, *Unpacking Narratives of Religious Understandings*, I return to the discussion of the women's narratives of teaching and how they are conflated with Christian narratives of service and love. I discuss how discourses of primary education and Christianity overlap and examine possible implications for the teachers who adopt them and the students they teach. In the end, I argue that the question is not—if religion matters to teacher education, but *how* it matters—and how we can create spaces to talk about, honor, and yet question and investigate the role of religious understandings to teachers and students.

CHAPTER 2

CONVERSATIONS IN THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I begin by exploring literature on identity and the teacher's self to set the stage regarding why the religious understandings of pre-service (and in-service) teachers matter to the field of education. In the first section, *Why Identity Matters*, I examine research on how issues of identity intersect with the teaching profession and explain how I situate myself in this conversation.

In the second section, *The Teacher's Self and Teacher Education*, I explore literature that talks about how issues of identity manifest in teacher education. Included in this section is research on the concepts of purpose, mission, and calling that influence how some teachers view the education profession. This includes looking at the role of spirituality and religious beliefs in the lives of teachers.

In a section titled, *Christianity and Teaching*, I examine research on the influence of Christianity in the field of education and also look at literature specifically discussing Christian students in teacher education programs.

Finally, in the section, *Unpacking Religious Understandings in Teaching*, I explain how this study was influenced by the themes and questions found in this literature review.

Why Identity Matters

The belief that teaching involves the whole person has impacted teacher education through the works of Palmer (2007), Noddings (1993), Britzman (2003) and Ladson-Billings (2009), to name a few. The underlining argument is that teaching is “complex, personal, and

social,” not just “technical” (Olsen, 2008, p. 5). In other words, teachers cannot separate self from practice (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010), and identities cannot be shed at the classroom door (Glanzer & Talbert, 2005). Accordingly, how pre-service teachers identify affects the formation of their teacher identity (Britzman, 2003), and these issues of identity can influence education students’ experiences in teacher education programs (White, 2009).

Another consideration is how teacher identity affects a future teacher’s students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Liggett, 2008), especially since schools are becoming increasingly racially and culturally diverse, yet the pool of prospective teachers remains relatively homogeneous with “more than 80 percent of prospective teachers nationally identifying as White” (McDonald, 2007, p. 2049). These reasons to examine teacher identity are not discrete categories, but are inter-related and provide a starting point to explore why teacher identity warrants further examination.

Before I proceed, I want to situate myself in this conversation, as I recognize the term “identity” is incredibly complex and contested, but I also believe it is a useful framework to examine teachers’ lives in a holistic way (Olsen, 2008). According to Appiah (2006), “‘Identity’ may not be the best word for bringing together the roles gender, class, race, nationality, and so on play in our lives, but it is the one we use” (p. 15). To clarify, my definition of identity aligns with Danielewicz’s (2001), who defines identity as “how individuals know and name themselves ... and how they are recognized and regarded by others” (p. 3). Similarly, Gee (2000) views identity as being recognized as a “certain ‘kind of person’ in a given context” (p. 99). I also agree with scholars (Danielewicz, 2001; Rodgers & Scott, 2008) who claim individuals have multiple identities and that these identities are shifting (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

Charon (2007) claims identity is a part of our self-perception and “the name we call ourselves” (p. 86), and that this naming is socially constructed and helps us understand our world:

Thus, defining who the self is, as are all other actions the actor takes towards his or her self, is carried out in interaction with others. As others label me, so I come to label myself. The names given us become our names, our social addresses, our definitions of who we are in relation to those with whom we interact. The identities are labels used, not by all others, but by reference groups and significant others of the individual. And these identities become central to us over time as our interactions reconfirm them over and over. (p. 86)

According to Charon (2007), our identities guide our actions and simply stated, are “who we think we are” (p. 150). For example, if “who we think we are” is *a religious person with a calling*, that belief may influence our actions. I view identity as both personal (how we name ourselves) and as social (how others perceive and name us), and consider the personal and social to be fluid and shifting.

The Teacher’s Self and Teacher Education

Developing a Professional Identity

What role does one’s identity play in learning to teach? Danielewicz (2001) describes her experience with prospective teachers and their process of identity construction:

It was clear that no amount of methods, tactics, or everyday support or encouragement (“You’ll do just fine!”) would be forceful enough to resolve my students’ questions about who they were and who they were going to become—questions of identity. Furthermore, certain aspects of their “selves” (as they described them, such as being a Christian or being

gay), affected, influenced, interacted with, and conflicted with their attempts to become a teacher, to develop a professional identity. (p. 14)

The development of a professional teaching identity requires the engagement of an individual's personal identity. According to Ball and Goodson (1985), "Teachers' lives outside school, their latent identities and cultures, have an important impact on their work as teachers" (p. 13).

Pre-service teachers enter teacher education programs not as blank slates, but as complex human beings with a wide-range of experiences (McLean, 1999). Some scholars (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Lamote & Engels, 2010; Schepens, Aelterman, & Vlerick, 2009) argue that teacher education should be more cognizant of teacher identity, since teacher education students "undergo a shift in identity as they move through programs of teacher education" (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 175), and because identity affects teaching practice (Lamote & Engels, 2010; Schepens et al., 2009). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) found students graduating from teacher education programs "could articulate only a very tentative sense of their identities as teachers" (p. 185), revealing a need to "more effectively address identity as a component of teacher education" (p. 176).

Similarly, Ronfeldt and Grossman (2008) found university coursework provided little opportunity to "try on versions of professional identity" (p. 49) and argued "professional education could play a more central role in helping novices navigate these contradictions and tensions in constructing, experimenting with, and evaluating provisional professional identities" (p. 57). Focusing on pre-service teacher identity could change the face of teacher education. According to McLean (1999):

This ongoing reexamination of personally meaningful material, weaving together exploration of others' stories with recreations of one's own, reflection on public domain

and personal theories, and shared reflections on one's first-hand experiences, all suggests a very different teacher education. In this process, there could not be a host of discrete courses, each with a formal syllabus that, in advance, assigned a new topic to each week.

There would need to be time to explore ideas together, and time to talk. (p. 83)

Focusing on talk, on discourse, is also advocated by Britzman (2003). She calls teaching "dialogic" and a "struggle for voice and discursive practices amid a cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences, and available practices" (p. 31).

Britzman (2003) recalls how entering a teacher education program impacted her as an individual, "Once I entered teacher education as a student, it dawned upon me that learning to teach was doing something to who I was becoming" (p. 12). The idea that teaching, or becoming a teacher, changes a pre-service teacher is a notion that surprised Britzman. She states, "Teaching was not supposed to do anything to the teacher; it was what the teacher did to others" (p. 12), but Britzman found that teaching, in particular student teaching, did impact a student's identity. Britzman interviewed an education student, Jamie Owl, and documented her experiences as a student teacher. Jamie was conflicted as she became a teacher, and tried "to construct an identity based upon not fitting into the traditional roles expected of teachers" (p. 123). According to Britzman:

Relevant here are two types of conflicting views on what it means to take up the identity of a teacher: the centripetal or normative voice, which defines what a teacher is and does in relation to the kind of authority and power teachers are expected to deploy; and the centrifugal or resisting voice, which speaks to one's deep convictions, investments, and desires. (p. 123)

Jamie found these two voices to be in “constant antagonism” (p. 123) and yet, before going into teaching, she did not think about how “becoming a teacher might change her” (p. 84).

The process of becoming a teacher requires the negotiation of identity. Teacher education students may not be prepared to wrestle with identity issues, but as Britzman (2003) states, “To learn to teach is also to tell a story of what learning to teach ‘does’ to and for student teachers” (p. 10). For a teacher education student, identity does matter.

The Inner Landscape- Spirituality, Meaning, and Teaching

The import of personal beliefs and identity is epitomized in the work of Parker Palmer. He claims:

“Who is the self that teaches?”.... is the most fundamental question we can ask about teaching and those who teach—for the sake of learning and those who learn. By addressing it openly and honestly, alone and together, we can serve our students more faithfully, enhance our own well-being, make common cause with our colleagues, and help education bring more light and life to the world. (Palmer, 2007, p. 8)

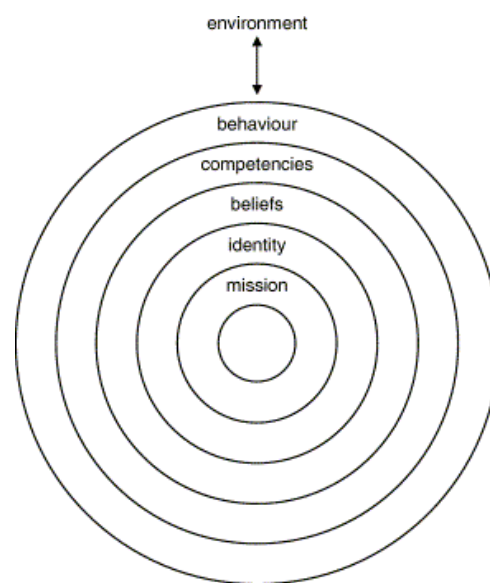
Palmer claims educators should focus on the “inner landscape of the teaching self” (p. 5), which includes spirituality. He does not define spirituality in “religious” terms. Yet his definition of spirituality as the “ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life” (p. 5) could certainly include religion as some individuals may define spirituality through their religious beliefs (Marshall, 2009). Palmer’s basic argument is that teaching is personal and “*good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*” (p. 10).

Palmer is not alone in his holistic approach to teaching or his acknowledgement of teachers’ spirituality. Hartwick and Kang (2013) argue that “teachers with deep spiritual beliefs

appear to draw upon these aspects of their identity and apply them to their professional roles” (p. 169). Fred Korthagen also examines the beliefs of teachers and challenges the “classical controversy” found in teacher education: groups who focus on teacher competencies versus groups who focus on the teacher’s self. Instead of accepting this either/or division, he argues to “broaden the discussion” (Korthagen, 2004, p. 79) with a model that demonstrates the many factors influencing a teacher’s behavior. He calls the model: “The onion: a model of levels of change” (p. 80).

Figure 1

The Onion: A Model of Levels of Change (Korthagen, 2004)



The outer two levels are the only ones observable by others—the environment (“the class, the students, the school”) and “behaviour” (p. 80). Competencies are described as subject matter knowledge, as well as skills and attitudes, and “are determined by... beliefs” (p. 80). Korthagen elaborates by stating, “If a teacher believes that attention to pupils’ feelings is just ‘soft’ and unnecessary, he or she will probably not develop the competency to show empathic understanding” (p. 81). He argues that “the beliefs teachers hold with regard to learning and

teaching determine their actions” (p. 81). The next level, identity, is described as an individual’s belief about him or herself, and how that person defines and “sees his or her (professional) identity” (p. 81). Lastly, at the core of the model, is mission, which is also called the spirituality level in other models (Korthagen, 2004).

Korthagen (2004) explains the core level by stating:

Where the identity level is concerned with the personal singularity of the individual, the spirituality level is about “the experiences of being part of meaningful wholes and in harmony with superindividual units such as family, social group, culture and cosmic order” (Boucouvalas, 1988). In short, it is about giving meaning to one’s own existence.... we are talking about deeply felt, personal values that the person regards as inextricably bound up with his or her existence. (p. 85)

According to Korthagen, the central question for the mission or spirituality level is: “With which larger entity do I feel connected” (p. 85)? He claims the answer could be religious in nature, a commitment to World Peace, or a commitment to helping children develop self-worth, etc. Regardless, Korthagen argues that this level can be directly relevant to teachers and their professional development.

Korthagen believes all the levels can influence the others, in both directions. In other words, there is fluidity between the levels. He highlights the impact of personal qualities on the deeper levels; these are qualities such as “creativity, trust, care, courage, sensitivity, decisiveness, spontaneity, commitment, and flexibility (Tickle 1999)” (p. 86). He references the work of psychologists Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, who work within a field of psychology called positive psychology, and emphasize positive traits in individuals they call “character strengths” (p. 86). Examples of these strengths include the qualities described earlier such as

creativity and courage, but also include “spirituality and transcendence (‘strengths that connect us to the larger universe’, Peterson & Seligman, 2000)” (p. 86). These strengths are “synonymous with what Ofman (2000) calls core qualities;” qualities that Ofman claims are “always potentially present” and “come from the inside” while competencies “are acquired from the outside” (p. 86).

Korthagen (2004) agrees with this distinction and states that core qualities, or the deeper levels of change, can impact the outer levels. According to Korthagen:

It is vital that teachers are not only cognitively aware of their core qualities, but that they are emotionally in touch with those qualities, that they take the step leading to conscious decisions to make use of those core qualities, and then carry out those decisions. Often, this may initially require help from a teacher educator. (p. 87)

Korthagen’s focus on the inner levels of his model reflects his view that teacher behavior cannot be simplified to mere competencies. He also points out that there can be discrepancies between the levels, which can lead to inner conflicts for the teacher. The ideal is “complete ‘alignment’ of the levels” forming “one coherent whole matching the environment” (p. 87).

White (2009) argues that Korthagen’s work “directly supports the importance of religion as an influence on teacher identity development” (p. 864). If an education student’s mission (core level) is religious in nature, religion could influence the other levels. According to White:

Even those teachers who may not identify religion as a core experience still have a religious orientation that may influence their teaching; a secular orientation is still an orientation in reference to religion. However ... research indicates that an increasing number of individuals are citing that religion is important to their lives. (p. 864)

Korthagen (2004) does not place more import on any of the levels per se. He focuses more on the inner levels simply because “they have received far less attention in the literature on teaching and teacher education than the outer levels” (p. 93). He argues that teacher educators should be aware of how the levels relate to each other and encourages teacher educators to take the core qualities of teachers seriously.

If a teacher’s level of mission is influenced by religion, those beliefs may influence other levels such as behavior or competencies in the classroom. Korthagen claims little research has been done on the level of mission and describes this research gap as “unfortunate” since “there are still many people who choose to become teachers, because they feel that they have a ‘calling’ (compare Hansen, 1995)” (p. 90).

Called to Teach

Teachers and education students may indeed view teaching as a calling, and for many their definition of calling is influenced by religious and spiritual beliefs (Hartwick, 2007; Joldersma, 2006; Mayes et al., 2003). The terms “religion” and “spirituality” have multiple definitions and are at times problematic to use, since spirituality can be defined independent from religion or as a term encompassing religion. According to Stein (2011), “Religiosity has become *spirituality* and the religious, *the spiritual*” (p. 58). This convergence of terms can present challenges when discussing “calling”—since the word sometimes implies a religious connection, while at other times it does not (Hansen, 1995).

This confluence of terms becomes apparent in the literature on teaching and calling. Some scholars view the call to teach as birthed out of religious faith (Cowan, Ebertz, & Shields, 2002; Joldersma, 2006; LeFevre, 1958; Yount, 1999). For example, Joldersma (2006) describes the Christian call to teach as “a sacred obligation” and an “ethical responsibility to the student as

other” (p. 69). Phillips (2011) uses theologian Frederick Buechner ‘s definition of vocational calling, describing “the place where deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (p. 298).

Other scholars (Buskist, Benson, & Sikorski, 2005) define the call to teach more inclusively, describing calling as “an inner urge or prompting that compels an individual to undertake a specific course of action” and describing “called” teachers as those who “find teaching rewarding in ways that other vocations are not” (p. 112). “Calling” may be interpreted differently, but it is still a term with which many teachers and teacher education students identify (Farkas et al., 2000; Hartwick, 2007; Helm, 2006; Mayes et al., 2003). Yet, the “sense of a teacher’s ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’ has received remarkably little research attention” (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012, p. 7), and according to Phillips (2011), “the calling literature involving college students is very sparse” (p. 297).

One of the few studies addressing pre-service teachers and calling (Marshall, 2009) was conducted by Mayes et al. (2003) who interviewed 10 prospective teachers at Brigham Young University (BYU) and 10 prospective teachers at Southern Oregon University (SOU). They asked seven questions examining “whether or not the respondent felt that she had been ‘called’ by God or some higher power to be a teacher” (p. 85). All of the participants had previously claimed to have a spiritual calling to teach. The participants in the BYU group all identified as Mormon, while the SOU group was more religiously diverse, “four portrayed themselves as non-denominational Christians, two as Catholic, one as a Catholic-Yoga mixture, one as Lutheran, one as an inactive Presbyterian, and one as a Buddhist” (p. 87).

When it came to the issue of calling, five of the 10 SOU students felt “God had chosen them to be teachers” (p. 88). One participant stated, “the Lord chose this path for me and knows that I can do it. To quit would be quitting on the Lord” (p. 88). There were also five of the BYU

students who explicitly stated God had “directed them to be teachers” (p. 88). One student originally had plans to become a lawyer but ““felt the Lord did not intend that for me”” (p. 88).

According to Mayes et al. (2003):

Both groups of our respondents made it abundantly clear that they felt that their spiritual commitments played a significant role in their decision to become teachers—a role which many of them felt they had been literally *destined* to fill although there were notable differences between the two groups in the circumstance surrounding the call. (p. 102)

If religious students feel led to teaching because of spiritual influences, more research is needed to understand the implications of those beliefs. According to Mayes et al., teacher educators should consider a pre-service teacher’s spiritual commitment, for this commitment may be “quite central in the evolution of her decision to teach” and continue “to affect her self-understanding and practice” (p. 103).

Spiritual and religious influences, and feeling *called to teach*, may be widespread in the field of education. Hartwick (2007) examined calling by randomly surveying 882 teachers from the Wisconsin Public School system in the spring of 2003. He collected 317 surveys focusing on teachers’ spiritual and religious beliefs and found the majority of the teachers viewed teaching as a calling:

... a solid majority (59.4%) of teachers in the sample believed that they had been called by God (felt a deep knowing and sense of mission) to teach. Even more telling, roughly a quarter of (24.1%) teachers in the sample strongly agreed with the statement “I have been ‘called’ by God (felt a deep knowing and sense of mission) to teach.” (p. 138)

Hartwick claims there is a growing understanding of the role spirituality plays within education and a new paradigm within academia. This paradigm “acknowledges that moral and spiritual

implications permeate all aspects of life” (p. 155), therefore the field of education is taking the spiritual life of teachers more seriously.

A key part of my research is to understand what students *mean* by calling and how that meaning influences experience. For some students, viewing teaching as a calling may result in a greater commitment to teaching (Serow as cited in Marshall, 2009) and may explain why they entered teaching in the first place. This includes beliefs that God chose teaching for them or guided them to teaching; others may state the decision to teach came after listening to what God wanted for their lives (Mayes et. al, 2003). The limited research on calling focuses on these definitions, but more research is needed to understand how these definitions are formed, reinforced, and influence experience. Many education students and teachers feel called to teaching (Gordon, 1993; Hartwick, 2007; Mayes et al., 2003; Whitbeck, 2000), but more research is needed regarding how calling influences views on teaching and experiences within teacher education, especially when calling is linked to religious understandings.

Christianity and Teaching

Before I delve into how the Christian beliefs of education students and teachers may influence their approaches to—and thoughts on—teaching, I think it is important to note the influence of Christianity on the teaching profession as a whole in the United States. According to Burke and Segall (2011), “the historical roots and ties of American education to Christianity are well documented” (p. 632). When Horace Mann promoted the common schools in the mid-1830s, the “notion that the common school ought to serve as a vehicle of and for Protestantism was one accepted as natural and common-sensical to the Protestant majority in the US at the time” (p. 637). Burke and Segall argue that the need for court decisions in the twentieth century (regarding religion and public schools), point to Christianity’s lasting influence on American

education, and state that “although teaching religion in schools is no longer permitted ... religious understandings—intended or not—still very much pervade what we do in the name of education today” (p. 639). This context of American education provides a backdrop for many of the assumptions about teaching at work in the culture—understandings that I will later argue influence my participants’ views.

Christian Beliefs and Teacher Education Curricula

When it comes to how Christian understandings surface in teacher education programs, research (James, 2010; James, 2011; Macdonald & Kirk, 1999) indicates Christian beliefs play an important role in some students’ coursework and class participation. James (2010) explored the ways “theologically certain” students responded to democratic education in her social studies education classroom and found students “who describe themselves as ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘Biblical’ Christians, often resist democratic education” (p. 619). While conducting a discussion about including “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, one of her Christian students, Jackie, refused to participate:

... I noticed Jackie sitting apart from her group-mates with her arms crossed. When I approached her to ask if everything was okay, Jackie responded, “I am not going to participate in this discussion. My faith in God means that, for me, there is one right answer to the question you’re asking.” (p. 619)

James was troubled by Jackie’s reluctance to engage in and experience democratic dialogue and questioned how Jackie’s beliefs would influence her future classroom. Christina, another theologically certain student, likened democratic education to a spider’s web that could entangle her in moral relativism (James, 2011). Clearly, for these students, some experiences and curricula caused tension and conflict because of their Christian beliefs. In these instances,

teacher education and the students' Christian faith were not compatible, but disparate and irreconcilable.

Similarly, James (2010) found many of her Christian education students felt like outsiders, and even "enemies," in the program:

One student said recently, "When I enter the education building, I feel like I've crossed enemy lines." Many students admit that they learn the lingo of democratic and multicultural education well enough to get through, but grow more rigid in their personal political and religious beliefs as a result of their time with us. (p. 634)

It is unclear whether or not this rigidity correlates with the finding that religious students become more religious while in teacher education programs (Kimball et al., 2009). Regardless, religious understandings play a role in how some Christian students respond to curriculum interpreted as irreconcilable with their faith. For these students, democratic education and multiculturalism were perceived as cultural relativism and therefore problematic. Research in the field of science education also indicates religious beliefs influence some Christian students' perception and rejection of certain curricula.

Within the field of science education, there is a significant amount of research on the conflict between religion and science and how that affects the teaching of certain content (Dodick et al., 2010). Torres (2009) found Christian biblical beliefs had "a strong influence on teachers' astronomical beliefs" (p. 25), such as the age of the Earth, often leading to misconceptions. Some of these tensions are also evident in the field of physical education. Macdonald and Kirk (1999) found Christian student teachers had to "balance their assurance that their beliefs were 'right' and had a significant moral force, with the socially critical liberalism of the curriculum" (p. 139). Christian students may face dual moral missions: "responsibility to

their church to proselytize and, on the other hand, responsibility to the socially critical liberal curriculum as defined by the State” (p. 140).

Christian Beliefs and Approaches to Teaching

Not only can Christian beliefs influence experiences while learning to teach, but can also influence approaches to teaching. Nelson (2010) found a connection between teachers’ Christian identity and their teaching practice. He examined how teachers reconciled their religious identity with their teacher identity by studying two Christian teachers at the same public K-8 school. His case study of two female teachers, members of the same church (Christian Protestant Baptist), examined how they “enacted their religious identity in their approach to teaching” (p. 336). The two participants, Gwen and Jada, both incorporated their religious beliefs in their work, but their approaches were different. Nelson describes Gwen’s religious Christian identity as “open-minded, ecumenical, and almost syncretistic” and an “ongoing developmental process” (p. 350) and more internal than external. In contrast, Nelson found Jada’s religious Christian identity more “action-oriented” and “no mere set of beliefs” but an identity that forces “her into an advocacy role” (p. 350). For Jada, “anyone in need” (p. 350) could expect her aid:

Jada describes a squelching of religious conversation and engagement at the school with issues of around religion, but in her own classroom she is outspoken in both areas and states that students know and are drawn to her in part by this openness. (pp. 350-351)

Jada’s advocacy also extended to students outside her faith (e.g. Muslim students), but Nelson viewed her support as paternalistic.

Even though both teachers incorporated and approached their Christian religious identity in different ways, Nelson found that both Gwen and Jada “did not feel prepared to deal with religious identity as teachers” (p. 351) by their pre-service education programs or by their

mentors. Nelson states, “They did not know much about the law relating to religion and teaching, other than the vague generalities connected to the First Amendment. They felt they could only guess at school policy around religion” (p. 351).

De Kock (2009) also studied the impact of identity in teaching; he frames his research question in terms of ideological identity, and how that identity affects response to educational innovations. De Kock interviewed six teachers from three Dutch Protestant secondary schools, and studied how they responded to a particular educational reform in the Dutch school system. The study took place at “the most orthodox Protestant secondary schools in the Netherlands” (p. 309), and provides some insight into how teachers see their ideology impacting their practice.

One of the teachers in the study, Robert, emphasized the impact of his faith in his teaching, saying:

Being a Christian has a profound influence on your outlook as a teacher on teaching.

Subsequently, your outlook strongly influences your behavior. Looking from this angle, your ideological identity is a base in which other decisions in the educational and pedagogical field are made. (p. 314)

Another teacher, Luke, believed his ideological identity affected his teaching in several ways. His approach towards students was impacted by “the biblical portrayal of mankind,” for example he felt compassion for “student’s weak points” (p. 314), and his view of God as a “welcoming God who wants to give grace” (p. 315) affected his openness towards students. Other participants in the study acknowledged the impact of their ideology on their teaching practice and classroom, but “they differ considerably in the way their faith shapes their personal (professional) lives” (p. 321).

Glanzer and Talbert (2005) also researched how religious identity affects teaching. They use the terms “faith” and “worldview” (more than “identity”) but provide insight into how religious belief affects a teacher’s practice. They studied students at a Christian university and how these students “foresaw their faith or worldview influencing matters such as their philosophy of education, choice of curriculum, teaching methodology, and discipline style” (p. 26). Glanzer and Talbert found students planned to incorporate their faith or worldview in “indirect ways that would not only pass constitutional muster but still allow them to preserve a connection between the religious aspect of their identity and their work as a teacher” (p. 26). Those “indirect ways” included: teacher modeling, teaching, or exhibiting moral virtues or “character qualities such as justice, compassion, or honesty” (p. 27). Unlike some of the research mentioned earlier, the majority of these students did *not* believe their worldview would inform curriculum or teaching methods.

Lastly, there is also the consideration of how religious beliefs influence a teacher’s ability to cope with the stressors of teaching. Hartwick and Kang (2013) found “teachers may implicitly draw from their spiritual and religious convictions and practices when faced with professional stress” and “many teachers believe that praying makes them better educators” (p. 179). Kang’s (2008) case study examining four Christian elementary teachers found prayer with and for colleagues may “strengthen” connections and “ameliorate professional stress” (p. 181).

Unpacking Religious Understandings in Teaching

Religious beliefs and understandings are part of the fabric of the teaching profession: from the history of the American school system to the discourse that frames teaching as a calling. According to White (2010), “Educational research on multiculturalism and teacher identity indicates that personal experience and professional practice are interwoven and cannot be

separated, as the metaphorical separation of church and state might suggest” (p. 42). Yet, despite the role of religion in many teacher education students’ lives, most “admit they had little to no opportunity to think about the intersection of their faith and their practice during their pre-service years” (James, 2011, p. 32). Nelson (2010) also found some teachers felt unprepared by their teacher education programs to deal with their religious identity as teachers. If religious students are wrestling with issues of identity in their education programs, we need to better understand their concerns, needs, and experiences. Similarly, if education students feel *called to teach*, we as teacher educators need to understand the implications of this belief.

According to Baurain (2012):

Elshtain (2002) asks, “Does, or should, teaching reflect the religious perspective of the teacher?” and answers, “Yes, necessarily and always, because no deep commitment can ever be shed completely when a teacher enters the classroom” (p. 193). This is not a license for preaching or proselytizing but a recognition that teachers never stop embodying who they are: “religious convictions, if they are robust and go deep, are essential, not incidental, to who a person is and to what a person does” (p. 200). (p. 315)

The purpose of this study is to add to this literature, building off the belief that religious understandings matter to the teaching profession. As stated, Hartwick (2007) found the majority of the teachers in his study viewed teaching as a calling, but more research is needed on what calling means to in-service and pre-service teachers. Also, there is a dearth of literature providing education students a space to share their views and help educators better understand how their religious understandings inform their views on teaching. Some scholars (Burke & Segall, 2011; White, 2010) argue that “religion” is a category that should be examined along with the areas of difference typically discussed in education—issues of gender, race, class, and

sexuality. This research provides a space that allows these Christian pre-service teachers to add to the discussion—to better understand the import and influence of their religious understandings on their views on teaching.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The central research question was: *How do religious student teachers define and think about teaching as a calling, and how do their religious meanings and perspectives influence their experiences in the context of their work at a public university?* One of my goals was to understand the ways the participants' religious beliefs influenced their experiences within teacher education. Specifically, I wanted to understand what viewing teaching as *a calling* meant to them and how that view influenced their thoughts and actions in their programs and in the classroom. I chose narrative inquiry because I was interested in understanding their experiences and how they made sense of the intersection of their personal and professional beliefs. Also, by using narrative inquiry, these women's voices served as a source of knowledge in the research.

In this chapter, I will describe my use of narrative inquiry as a method, the context for the study, data collection and data analysis, as well as some limitations and considerations regarding the research.

Qualitative Research and the Use of Narrative Inquiry

Patton (2002) calls purpose the "controlling force in research" (p. 213) and believes that "decisions about design, measurement, analysis, and reporting all flow from purpose" (p. 213). My purpose for this research was to understand and give voice to this particular group of students and to understand their experiences within an education program at a public university. My research falls under the category of "basic" qualitative research, as Merriam (1998) describes

a researcher involved in a basic qualitative study as someone who seeks “to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (p. 11). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative researchers “set up strategies and procedures to enable them to consider experiences from the informants’ perspectives” (p. 8). In light of these descriptions, a qualitative research design addressed the goal of my study: to gain understanding regarding the beliefs of the participants, learning from their insider perspective. My questions revolved around the participants’ Christian religious understandings and could not have been adequately explored through a quantitative study.

My research questions were investigated through the use of narrative inquiry. There are different approaches to narrative inquiry and different ways that scholars use the term; narrative inquiry can be considered “an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses and diverse disciplinary approaches” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 62). However, the common thread that weaves throughout the narrative approach is the focus on story and the “interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the ones who live them (Chase, 2005, p. 651)” (p. 62). Stories and narratives are ways individuals tell and retell how they define and make meaning of their experiences.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), there are three sets of considerations to keep in mind when using narrative inquiry: “theoretical,” “practical, field text-oriented,” and “interpretive-analytic” (p. 127). Theoretical considerations include moving away from a “formalist” approach to inquiry that begins with a certain theory—to a narrative approach that begins “with experience as lived and told in stories” (p. 128). Accordingly, narrative researchers often find that as their work progresses, qualities of other methodologies (ethnography, phenomenology, etc.) emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Yet, kept at the forefront is a

“narrative view of experience” (p. 128). In other words, the stories of the participants (as well as my own story) were always a part of this work.

The practical considerations, as described above, include moving from the interviews with participants to the work of constructing and finding meaning in the texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This leads to “interpretive-analytic considerations” (p. 130) that acknowledges the interpretive aspect of narrative inquiry. As a narrative researcher, I am asking “questions of meaning and social significance” (p. 130) of the data, of the women’s stories, and I am constructing that meaning.

The Three-Dimensional Space

The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) allows for the examination of participants’ experiences as they look “inward and outward,” “backward and forward,” and locates “them in place” (p. 54). My research questions focused on these dimensions to better understand each woman’s experiences and stories. However, as a narrative researcher, I must also consider my place in this inquiry space—how my experiences influence this work. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, “as inquirers we meet ourselves in the past, present, and future” (p. 60). Therefore, I cannot act as if there is no “I” in this research account, as I bring to this study my interpretation, my stories, and my re-presentation of these women’s stories.

Research Questions

My subsidiary research questions addressed all the dimensions outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as shown in Table 1 (p. 11). The questions were designed to understand the participants’ experiences and meanings as they prepared to enter a profession they viewed as their calling. Additionally, the questions were intended to address the multiple influences that

led them to view teaching as a calling and to better understand the role of their religious beliefs in their definitions and experiences. Below I explain how I viewed each question in relationship to the goals of the study. Again, as stated in chapter one, these dimensions often overlapped and were not discrete.

Looking Backward: In what ways have teacher education students' life experiences contributed to their understanding and meaning of teaching as a calling?

The purpose of this question was to gain understanding surrounding the participants' life experiences that influenced their views on calling. This included the history of their religious beliefs, their families' roles in those beliefs, and how their views on teaching intersected with views on calling and religious faith. "Looking backward" provided a way to examine experiences that influenced their views on teaching, young children, and how they developed their understanding of their talents or "giftings." The questions addressing their life experiences provided insight into why they felt called to teach.

Looking Forward: How do student teachers' understanding and meaning of calling contribute to how they view their evolving roles as teachers?

This question sought to answer how viewing teaching as a calling may manifest in their decisions and actions in their future classrooms. In other words, how would viewing teaching as a calling matter once they were with students? For example, interview questions about looking forward included: "Why do you want to teach?" and "How would you describe yourself as a future teacher?" These types of questions helped to understand how they viewed their roles as teachers, how they approached and viewed students, and what they hoped to accomplish in their classrooms.

Looking Inward: In what ways do student teachers reflect upon and define the implications of their understanding of teaching as a calling?

All of the participants identified with the idea of teaching as a calling, albeit to different degrees. “Looking inward” sought to answer if this identification was a thoughtful, meaningful connection (teaching is my calling and therefore ...) or simply language adopted through life experience. Did viewing teaching as calling *mean* anything? The purpose of this question was to investigate the degree the participants had considered and reflected upon the import of seeing teaching as a calling.

Looking Outward: How do student teachers understand and act on the various messages they receive about what it means for teaching to be a calling?

This question was designed to understand the different messages the participants received about calling and teaching. Contexts (such as their churches, families, school placements, classes within teacher education) contain messages on what it means to have a calling and/or what it means to teach young children. “Looking outward” explored how the participants came to understand what calling means and how that meaning of calling could be enacted.

Situated in Place: What contributes to or hinders an education students’ ability and will to construct for themselves and act upon what it means for teaching to be a calling?

This question was intended to understand how different contexts help or hinder how the participants act upon their understanding of teaching as calling. Some of them acknowledged the public school context and how this context limited the expression of their religious beliefs in the classroom. This limitation was not always viewed as problematic, sometimes it was simply accepted as reality. There were other contexts, such as their teacher education classes, where they felt either supported (by peers and instructors) or challenged in their view of calling in relationship to their faith. “Situated in place” was intended to examine the ways their beliefs on calling and teaching were either supported or hindered.

Student Teaching

I chose to ask these questions during the student teaching semester. Student teaching is a critical time for teacher identity construction (Britzman, 2003; Trent, 2010; Vélez- Rendón, 2010) and is often marked by tension and negotiation as education students seek to develop their teacher identity (Britzman, 2003; Vélez- Rendón, 2010). Britzman describes the experience of student teaching as an ongoing mediation between two voices:

Relevant here are two types of conflicting views on what it means to take up the identity of a teacher: the centripetal or normative voice, which defines what a teacher is and does in relation to the kind of authority and power teachers are expected to deploy; and the centrifugal or resisting voice, which speaks to one's deep convictions, investments, and desires. (p. 123)

Competing voices, internal convictions versus external expectations, may become an issue for certain religious students during this semester. Up until this point, student teachers have theorized about teaching in a classroom; now, they are occupying the teaching role and defining who they will be as teachers.

Korthagen (2004) also found student teaching brought up issues of identity for some students. The practice of teaching caused these students to “face up to certain truths about themselves”:

Many of them were suffering from feelings of insecurity, and almost all were grappling with questions at the level of identity or mission, such as:.... Do I still want to become a teacher? Is there room for what inspired me to become a teacher in the first place? (p. 90)

For students who view teaching as a calling, the student teaching semester may result in these identity questions and tensions as they wrestle with how their calling will be enacted in their classrooms.

Research Context

The context for this study was a large, public university in the Southeastern United States located in a town with a population of approximately 100,000 people. This state university has a strong community presence, and with a large student enrollment (approximately 30,000 students at the time of this study), college students are an expected and catered to part of the population. The downtown area borders the oldest part of campus, and in many ways, it is the quintessential “college town.”

I chose the College of Education at this university for my study for several reasons. First, this college of education is one of the largest in the nation. The population I needed existed at this site: education students entering their student teaching semester. Also, I wanted to study students as a public institution, not at a religious or private college. Lastly, all of the participants had student teaching assignments at public elementary schools. Since I was interested in how their religious understandings influenced their views on calling and their work in public institutions (both in the college and in elementary schools), it was important that their student teaching experiences occur in that type of context.

Studying Myself

As I have mentioned, my interest in this topic began as I progressed through an education program at a public university. This was not foreign territory, and in many ways, I was squarely situated in the middle of this context and inquiry. First, I was born and raised in a Southern community. This university and the education students never felt unfamiliar to me. Also, I self-

identify as a Christian and have been a part of different Christian denominations and communities. I feel comfortable attending a wide variety of Christian worship services and am familiar with different programs and language associated with different denominations. For the most part, when my participants mentioned a certain ministry or organization, I knew what it was. In this way, I spoke their language.

Of course as a researcher, this presents certain questions and challenges. I intentionally worked to keep my participants from knowing my positionality toward the work. A recent comment from one of my participants led me to believe I did this with some success. After reviewing some of my writing for accuracy (and reading my story for the first time), Olivia wrote, “Lastly, I just have to acknowledge how impressed I am after reading at how well you interviewed us without us seeing your views.” I at least, to some degree, refrained from interjecting my opinions and perspectives during the interviews. My goal was to allow the participants to tell their stories without me leading in them in any particular direction. For example, going into the study, I thought the participants would share how they felt judgment in their education programs because of their religious beliefs. However, for the most part, this was not what they shared. I had to be careful not to project any of my experiences, or the stories I had heard from other students, on to their stories. I wanted them to share without me leading them to any particular conclusion. Of course, I realize that by research design and intent, researchers lead participants in many ways. However, I did not want my personal experiences (my own and my knowledge of other Christian students) to be in any way the focus of the interviews. I wanted to hear from them.

Data Collection

My initial goal was to survey all of the education students entering student teaching from one department in the College of Education. During my data collection semester, two of the three programs in this department had education students entering student teaching. I submitted questionnaires to these students who were enrolled in either of these programs. As my data collection will reveal, early childhood had the largest cohort that semester, and all of my participants ended up coming from this group. Also, I had experience interacting with students from the early childhood program and knew many were outspoken about their Christian beliefs.

My data collection began August 2012 and was completed December 2012. I began recruiting participants by distributing a questionnaire (see APPENDIX A) to survey all students scheduled to complete student teaching Fall 2012. I briefly met with education students during one of their classes and had them complete the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary.

I collected 42 questionnaires: 35 were from early childhood; seven were from a content specific program. The following table reveals how students answered questions regarding calling and their religious beliefs.

Table 3

Recruitment Questionnaire: Answers on Calling and Religious Affiliation

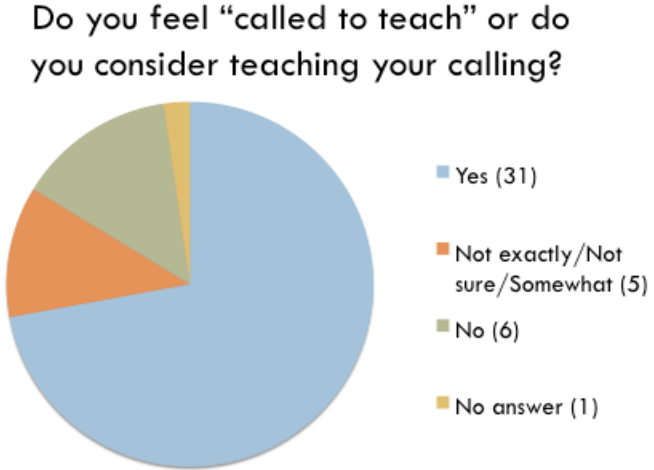
Gender/Age	Education Program	Do you feel “called to teach” or do you consider teaching your calling?	If yes, do religious beliefs influence your views on calling?	Do you consider yourself religious? If yes, what is your religious affiliation?
AMY Female/ 22	Early Childhood	Somewhat, yes- I know that I’m supposed to do it for a period of my life	Yes, I will use teaching as a way to love my children/co-teachers and show them what I believe through the way I act	I would say less “religious” and more “spiritual”- I am a follower of Jesus/ Christian
MARY Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Yes Christian
SARAH Female/21	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes, I feel that God gave me the gift and passion to teach children	Christian-Methodist
OLIVIA Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Yes Christian-Baptist
Female/22	Early Childhood	Called to teach	Yes	Yes. I’m saved by grace Jesus Christ. (Religion doesn’t really matter to me, it’s about a relationship w/ Jesus Christ)
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	----	Christian- Baptist
Female/22	Early Childhood	Teaching is my calling	Yes	Yes; Christian-Baptist
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Christian (Protestant)
Female/22	Early Childhood	Teaching my calling	----	Yes, I am Christian, specifically Baptist
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Yes Christian
Female/21	Early Childhood	No	----	Sort of. Agnostic
Female/22	Early Childhood	I consider teaching my calling	----	Yes, Christian, Methodist
Female/23	Early Childhood	Might be my calling	No	Yes, somewhat. Non-denominational
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes, I believe that this is what I was meant to do.	No	Somewhat, Catholic
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Yes Christian-Methodist
Female/23	Early Childhood	----	----	Not really
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Yes, Christian
----/----	Early Childhood	No, unfortunately I do not believe teaching is what I was called to do	----	Christian
Female/22	Early Childhood	(circled) “called to teach”	Yes	Methodist
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	I think it helps me with patience, etc. (understanding)	Yes, Christian

Female/20	Early Childhood	Yes	No	Yes- Baptist
Female/24	Early Childhood	Yes	Maybe	Yes Christian/Baptist
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Relationship w/Jesus Christ
Female/21	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	United Methodist
Female/21	Early Childhood	(circled) "called to teach"	Yes, I think we have spiritual gifts	Yes. Christian/Baptist
Female/22	Early Childhood	I feel "called to teach"	My religious beliefs have been a huge reason on my pursuit of getting my degree in Early Childhood Education	Christian
Female/22	Early Childhood	Yes, I feel I've been given certain gifts & a passion for children	Absolutely, they completely affect who I am, my teaching philosophies, & my goals	Yes: Christian: non- denominational, probably close to Baptist
Female/21	Early Childhood	Yes	Yes	Christian
Female/22	Early Childhood	(circled) "teaching your calling"	----	no
Female/23	Early Childhood	Yes	No	Yes Christian
Female/26	Early Childhood (graduate program)	Not really "called"-but I know I'm suppose to be a teacher	I prayed about my decision	Yes, Christian
Female/42	Early Childhood (graduate program)	No	----	I consider myself a follower of Jesus- not a person who is "religious" in a way that stresses rules or traditions.
Female/41	Early Childhood (graduate program)	Yes	Yes, I want to share how being a Christian can help one to be more secure in their decisions	Yes, Christian
Female/28	Early Childhood (graduate program)	No	----	No
----	Early Childhood (graduate program)	No	----	No
Female/22	Content Specific Program	I enjoy teaching & feel I have the potential to have a widespread positive impact as a teacher. If that's considered "called," then I guess so.	----	No-but spiritual & introspective
Female/22	Content Specific Program	Yes	No	More faithful than religious. Episcopalian.
Male/23	Content Specific Program	Not exactly. It is a convenient detour.	No	Not religious, but highly spiritually connected
Male/22	Content Specific Program	Yes, all of my mentors growing up were teachers and coaches.	No	Not really
Male/22	Content Specific Program	No	----	Yes Christian/ Non- denominational

Female/22	Content Specific Program	I am not sure	----	No
Female/21	Content Specific Program	Yes; I prayed about a career and was led to teaching senior year in HS, yet I feel that I am called to work with students, not only in education.	Yes	Christian- Non-denominational

There were more students in the early childhood cohort who identified with teaching as a calling, but again, the content specific program was very small. As shown below, the majority of the students surveyed identified with teaching as a calling.

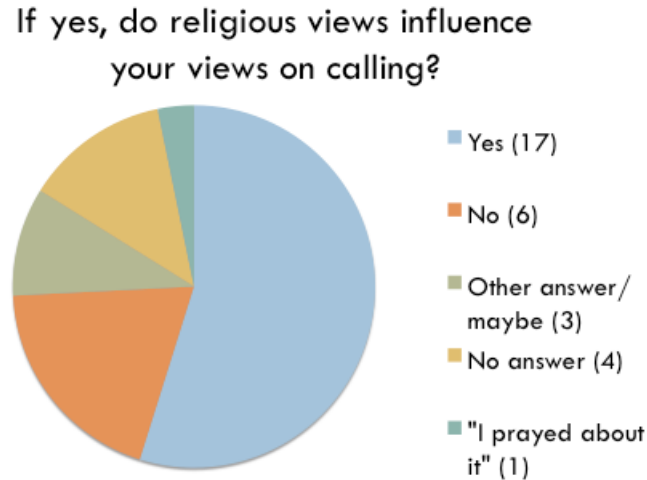
Figure 2
Teaching as a Calling



The majority of these students also stated their religious beliefs influenced this sense of calling as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Religious Views and Calling



After the questionnaire was collected, I recruited students based on their answers. Clearly my study involves a purposeful sample. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research involves selecting individuals who can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). For this study, purposeful sampling meant teacher education students who considered teaching a calling (or felt called to teach), and mentioned their religious faith in the identity salience question on the questionnaire (APPENDIX A, #3). According to Creswell this would be considered a “homogenous” (p. 127) type of sampling. Eight students from the early childhood cohort volunteered for the study; five met the above criteria. One student from the content specific program also volunteered, but did not mention her religious beliefs in the identity salience question. Of the five early childhood majors who volunteered and met the criteria, four returned my e-mails and agreed to be in the study. Even though my study was originally designed to incorporate students from different

faith traditions, all of the participants identified as Christians. Additionally, even though I did not intend to recruit solely Caucasian females, that ended up being the case.

Each participant was interviewed using an “interview guide approach” (Patton, 2002, p. 349) on six occasions. Even though I followed my interview guide, I pursued questions that emerged during the interviews and often repeated these questions with the other participants in subsequent interviews. After each interview, I recorded my thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a field journal, and it was here that I would record a new question that I felt needed to be asked of the other participants. I later added these questions to the interview guide. For example, when Amy had an issue with the word “calling,” I added the following question to the protocol: “I know I’ve used the word ‘calling,’ but is there another word that better describes how you see your teaching in relationship to your faith?” I then asked the others this question in subsequent interviews.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that field texts can help avoid “what Dewey called a *miseducative* experience” (p. 85, emphasis in original). Field texts can also help the narrative inquirer “move between intimacy with field participants and a reflective stance” (p. 95) and remain aware of “the details of place, of the nuanced warps in time, and of the complex shifts between personal and social observations and their relations” (p. 91). For these reasons, I kept my field journal and also provided my participants with a journal and asked them to record their thoughts and reflections after our interviews. However, only two of the four participants provided me with their journal at the end of the study.

Sources of Data

I used three sources of data in this study: transcripts from the 24 interviews, notes from my field journal, and the field texts/journals kept by my participants. Each source of data is described below:

Interviews. Table 4 shows the date, as well as the topic or focus, of each interview.

Table 4

Interview Timeline

	#1: Initial Interview/ Questions about Family History	#2: Questions about Calling and Teacher Education	#3: Questions about Student Teaching	#4: Questions about Student Teaching	#5: Questions about Student Teaching	#6: Final Interview/ Reflection After Completing Student Teaching
Amy	8/26/12	9/16/12	10/3/12	10/14/12	11/11/12	12/16/12
Mary	8/28/12	9/10/12	9/25/12	10/8/12	11/12/12	12/11/12
Sarah	8/30/12	9/13/12	9/28/12	10/18/12	11/26/12	12/12/12
Olivia	8/31/12	9/11/12	9/27/12	10/22/12	11/9/12	12/12/12

I conducted the initial interview with my participants at the beginning of their student teaching semester (See Appendix B). This interview was designed to understand each participant's personal history and what led her to choose teaching and this school of education. Included in this interview were questions about each participant's family history, religious understandings, and path to teaching. Questions progressed as follows: information about childhood and family, definition of religion, religion and daily life, religious practices, past schooling, the decision to attend the university, and the decision to become a teacher. This

interview typically lasted about an hour and was intended to help provide understanding regarding influences and life experiences that led to their work in education, as well as the import of their religious understandings.

The second interview focused specifically on their understandings of calling and experiences within teacher education. The purpose of this interview was to understand the participants' views and definitions of calling and how their beliefs might influence their teaching. I also wanted to know if viewing teaching in this way influenced their experiences in their education classes. Similarly, I wanted to know if they felt any conflict between their personal religious beliefs and their teacher education classes.

The following three interviews focused on their experiences while student teaching. These interviews were designed to understand how their views on calling, as well as their religious understandings, influenced their experiences once in the classroom. Included in these conversations were questions about the public space of teaching. I wanted to know what hindered or encouraged them to act upon their views of calling in regard to their classrooms.

My final interview was conducted after their student teaching was completed. It provided an opportunity for them to reflect upon the student teaching experience as a whole, as well as consider if their views on calling (or teaching) had changed over the semester. This final interview also provided a place to talk about the interview process and have them contribute to the conversation of what (if anything) talking about their beliefs and understandings "did." All the interviews typically lasted between 60-90 minutes, and all were audio-taped and transcribed.

My Field Journal. After each interview, I took notes in my field journal. I recorded basic information such as the date, time, and location of the interview, but I also wrote about my impressions post-interview. Sometimes this would include questions that would arise for me as a

new researcher such as: *Should I buy her coffee? How should I answer personal questions? I'm fearful I can't get her to talk enough.* My notes also included my reflections on the interview questions and observations about participants. I wrote about the framing of my questions, wondering about my choice of language and focus. I also recorded other challenges such as staying removed as a researcher and figuring out how to ask follow-up questions without “pushing” too far. At the end of my journal was a page devoted to future interview questions—the questions that emerged during the interviews that I later asked in subsequent interviews.

Participants' Field Texts. During our first meeting, I provided each participant with a blank journal. I encouraged them to use the journal as a place to reflect after our interviews and during student teaching. Unfortunately, at the end of the study, I was only able to collect and review two of the journals, as one of the participants could not find her journal and another forgot to bring her journal to the last meeting. However, Olivia's and Sarah's journals provide insight into their thoughts about the interviews and about their student teaching experiences and served to reinforce many of their comments during the interviews.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

My analysis of the data was influenced by the following assumptions mentioned earlier in the literature review:

- Teaching and teacher identity involves the whole person—personal and professional identities are intertwined.
- Education students enter the teaching profession with varied life experiences that influence their work and their views on teaching.
- Experience is both personal and social (Dewey, 1938).
- Knowledge and understandings are socially constructed.

According to Kramp (2004), after a narrative inquirer has her transcripts in hand, she then begins the process of analysis; this analysis begins and ends with the story or text. I repeatedly read and re-read the interviews and stories of each of my participants. Polkinghorne describes the “analysis of narratives” (as cited in Kramp, 2004, p. 120) as one type of narrative analysis that uses and identifies themes within and across each story. In this way, I narratively coded (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) the texts. Coding texts in this manner involves:

For example, names of the characters that appear in field texts, places where actions and events occurred, story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear are all possible codes. As narrative researchers engage in this work, they begin to hold different field texts in relation to other field texts. (p. 131)

I looked for “patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes” (p. 132) as I analyzed the data and constructed my research text.

To begin with, I needed to organize the data. I began by sorting the participants’ answers into categories such as: *involvement in Christian community; calling; faith and teaching; faith and teacher education; student teaching; “Why teach?” “Are you able to live out how you envisioned gifting, faith, teaching?” advice to faculty; and “Why are so many Christian women in early childhood?”* This initial organization helped me manage and further review the data.

After organizing, I then went through each subsidiary research question (backward, forward, inward, outward, and situated in place) and highlighted and sorted text according to each question by creating a word document with the name of each woman as a heading and excerpts of the transcripts relevant to each question under each woman’s name. For example, Amy would be the heading and then each subsidiary research question was a sub-heading under

her name. Under each sub-heading were the transcript texts relevant to that question. I then reread the excerpts and created codes according to topics found within this document. Some of the codes were: *focus on relationship; calling and gifting; faith community; showing love; prayer; and commitment*. I then looked across the women's stories for each section (each subsidiary research question) for repeated codes and commonalities, which became my themes for each question. I should acknowledge that there were many occasions when sections of the texts were repeated and addressed more than one subsidiary research question. There were also instances when some of the codes became themes. For example, "focus on relationship" was a code that became a theme under the forward question section.

The backward question was: *In what ways have teacher education students life experiences contributed to their understanding and meaning of teaching as a calling?* The common themes that emerged were: a sense of guidance from (and communication with) God; influence from their family and faith communities; a conflation of gifting and calling; and viewing teaching as an innate ability.

The forward question was: *How do student teachers' understanding and meaning of calling contribute to how they view their evolving roles as teachers?* A theme that emerged included a focus on the relational aspects of teaching—such as loving, caring, and supporting students.

The inward question was: *In what ways do student teachers reflect upon and define the implications of their understanding of teaching as a calling?* The participants' stories revealed themes such as "making a difference" in children's lives and a commitment to teaching that sometimes included a feeling of great commitment or holding themselves to a higher standard.

The outward question was: *How do student teachers understand and act on the various messages they receive about what it means for teaching to be a calling?* This resulted in themes regarding the participants' understandings about being a representative of God. In other words, this included themes such as being Christ-like, serving others, and loving others.

Lastly, the situated in place question was: *What contributes to or hinders an education students' ability and will to construct for themselves and act upon what it means for teaching to be a calling?* Themes that emerged regarding their ability to act upon calling included: the belief that God was a real help to them; the positive support of their peers/community; and for some the positive environment of their student teaching placement. Themes that emerged regarding any hindrance to enacting their calling included: not knowing the legalities of how their religious understandings could be incorporated in public schools; and for some, challenges in regard to student behavior and the structures of the schooling.

Issues of Representation

It was challenging to decide how to represent the women's stories in this research text. At times, organizing the data was difficult. To adequately represent their stories, my initial impulse was to include everything—or at least as much as possible—about their lives and experiences as communicated during the interviews. I could have written each woman's story as a separate narrative, but ultimately decided to write about some of the commonalities found in their stories. My goal was to present the data without over-simplifying or eliminating tensions or complexities found in the narratives, for even though themes emerged, their stories and understandings were unique and nuanced. First, I knew I wanted to address “calling” and examine their definitions and the themes surrounding their understandings of this term. Secondly, the theme regarding relationships in their lives and teaching was key to their stories and emerged as a chapter.

Finally, their experiences within their cohort and teaching placements, and the ways they talked about sharing similar religious beliefs with many of their peers, resulted in the final data chapter about religious homogeneity.

Once I decided upon this organization of my chapters, I still needed to consider how to explore and talk about my findings. I designed this study to serve as a space of understanding and have these women's voices contribute to the research. However, after I reviewed and read their stories, it became difficult *not* to acknowledge some of the gendered discourses that recurred in their descriptions of teaching. Even though I am not using feminist theory as my main theoretical perspective, I do use the work of some feminist scholars to ask questions about the data and examine how issues of gender may influence some of the participants' understandings.

The Work of Deborah Britzman and “Inherited Discourses”

The participants' narratives led me to the work of Deborah Britzman (2003) and her notion of cultural myths that may “overpopulate” (p. 29) the identity of a teacher. These cultural myths or stereotypes are “inherited discourses” (p. 26) and “beckon and repel, promote and dispute, particular meanings about the work and the identity of the teacher” (p. 223). For women teachers, and arguably even more so for early childhood women teachers, these stereotypes wield powerful messages on teacher identity. I use this idea of inherited discourses to think about, explore, and talk about the prevailing narratives at work in the participants' storytelling and the particular meanings associated with teaching found in the women's accounts. My goal is to use Britzman's work, and other scholarly work on gendered narratives, to consider and examine the social and cultural messages that may contribute to my participants' understandings.

The Participants' Views on the Accuracy of my Accounts

In the middle of my writing, I sent the participants an abbreviated version of my findings. I reminded them that I wanted their input regarding my re-telling of their stories. Three of the four responded to the e-mail and agreed to review the work. A week later, I sent them some writing, but only one participant, Olivia, responded to that e-mail. She found my account to be accurate, and her only critique was regarding a missing word in one of my sentences. After completing my dissertation, I sent the participants the entire document. This time it was Amy who responded. She felt I accurately represented what she said and was comfortable with my re-telling and representation. I had wanted to hear more about my interpretation from the other participants, but I understand the realities of time and other commitments that may have prevented their feedback. I hope the absence of communication suggests that they did not have any significant critique of my interpretations.

Limitations and Considerations

In qualitative research, the issue of research *validity* is sometimes reframed, moving away from the positivist association of the term (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Instead of *validity* focusing on describing a “truth,” the focus becomes more about *trustworthiness* of research determined by “its degree of persuasiveness, authenticity, and plausibility (Reissman, 1933)” (p. 14). Polkinghorne (2007) argues that narrative inquirers should be concerned with what “the storied text is intended to represent” (p. 479). Accordingly, the researcher needs to make explicit her understanding and interpretation of the collected data. Polkinghorne also mentions four “threats” to research that may cause a “disjunction between a person’s actual experienced meaning and his or her storied description” (p. 480). Accordingly, the researcher needs to consider:

(a) the limits of language to capture the complexity and depth of experienced meaning, (b) the limits of reflection to bring notice to the layers of meaning that are present outside of awareness, (c) the resistance of people because of social desirability to reveal fully the entire complexities of the felt meanings of which they are aware, and (d) the complexity caused by the fact that texts are often a co-creation of the interviewer and participant. (p. 480)

To combat these challenges Polkinghorne suggests: helping participants use figurative expressions, allowing time for the participants to reflect, interviewing each participant at least three times to build relationship and trust, and reflection regarding one's own assumptions and expectations so the participants' voices can be heard. I addressed some of these challenges by being mindful of the structure of my study. As stated in a previous section, I interviewed the participants six times and had them keep a reflective journal. I also intentionally allowed for time (usually three weeks) between interviews to allow them time to reflect.

I have been open about my assumptions and experiences relevant to this research, as well as the resulting benefits and limitations. A benefit would be my understanding of the worldviews of my participants. A limitation includes the possibility of me allowing my own personal experience and biases to color the data. I also acknowledge that I am the one making choices of analysis. In other words, there is the possibility that I excluded or included parts of the texts that may misrepresent what the participants said. Some of this is minimized through my efforts to read and re-read their accounts and examine the data in different ways. I was also encouraged by Olivia's response after reading my work as she stated, "Thank you for depicting my thoughts so accurately."

The purpose of this work is not to make generalizations about early childhood education students or *Christian* early childhood education students. Clearly by research design and sample size alone, this would be a misguided view of the work. Instead, my purpose is to better understand what *calling* possibly means to education students (and teachers) who adopt this language and to better understand how religious beliefs influence their views on teaching and teacher education. This research served to answer some of these questions—questions of understanding—but also served to create many more questions for me regarding the intersection of religious belief and the field of education.

In the following chapters, I begin with the participants' voices as they share their views and experiences. Each woman has her own section in chapters four, five, and six. I then look across their stories and highlight commonalities that emerged and connect my findings to the educational literature. The final section of each of the upcoming chapters is my discussion of the findings. It is here in the discussion section that I investigate, ask questions, and explore what their stories may mean to the field of education.

CHAPTER 4

CALLED TO TEACH

In this chapter, I explore the participants' understandings of calling and how those understandings influenced their views on teaching. I begin by examining their definitions of calling, as I seek to answer the question, "What does *calling* mean?" Calling is a word that often elicits powerful connotations and is appropriated in different ways. As previously stated, someone's definition of calling may or may not be linked to religious or spiritual beliefs, and different definitions and understandings make it difficult to know exactly what teachers mean when they say, "Teaching is my calling."

I begin by looking at each woman's responses to my questions about calling and being called to teach. I then highlight the common threads found throughout their stories about calling. Lastly, I discuss my findings in the context of literature on teaching and calling, and question the prevalence and usefulness of some of the discourses often found in primary education.

Amy

"... the Lord has given me certain gifts... I can use those in teaching or in other things ..."

It was during the second round of interviews with the participants that I asked questions about calling. Soon into my second interview with Amy, I realized that the term "calling" was more problematic than I realized. I had selected all the participants partly because they had answered affirmatively when asked, "Do you feel called to teach? Or, do you feel teaching is your calling?" However, I quickly realized that a brief answer on a questionnaire did not even begin to examine how calling may be perceived. To clarify, Amy admitted that calling was a

word she did not frequently use, and I began to question the usefulness in how I had framed my original research question.

I had designed my research questions to unpack different meanings of calling, and that is what the questions did. However, I was struck by the complexity of the meaning of the word.

When I asked Amy to define calling, she stated:

I think that there are things that people are more gifted at than other people. The Bible says that we all have different spiritual gifts and just are given different gifts just in general and that we are all part of one body so we need all these different parts to make up the one body, and how would we be able to function if we didn't have the person who could do this and could do that? And so there's some people who are—have strengths in one area and strengths in another area, I guess. So I guess that's kind of how I view it is like using those strengths that you have is kind of like following your calling.... Some people feel called to do things from God, I guess, so that's another aspect of that that's like a more specific thing if you're feeling like you feel called to do this specific thing ... if they feel like the Lord's telling them to do this or that, that's what they're supposed to do. I think that's also a calling.

I asked Amy if there was a difference between a calling and a *religious* calling. She acknowledged that certainly non-religious individuals may use the same language, but she was drawn to teaching because of her “gifts” and then she would “choose the more specific path” based on what she perceived God was telling her to do. In other words, she felt God would lead her in her choices regarding jobs. When asked if she felt God had called her to teach, she replied, “I guess so. The thing is, I don't have—I feel like it's definitely something that I've been called to do, but I don't have a moment where I was like, this is what I'm supposed to do.” Amy

stated that as she has progressed in her education program, she fell “more in love” with teaching. For Amy, this indicated how a sense of calling could unfold.

At this point in the interview, I interrupted our conversation to make sure I was not forcing Amy to frame her views in an artificial way. I told Amy:

I want you to make sure that you use language that you’re comfortable using.... I don’t want you to feel like you have to say, “Yeah, I do feel like it’s my calling.” You know what I mean? If there’s another word or another way to describe it, I want you to use that. I don’t want you to feel like you have to use that word.

Amy responded that it was “hard” for her since calling was not a word she used “that much.” She explained that she used calling more in reference to a specific situation when she felt God was leading her than “a general thing” like “pursuing teaching.” Amy felt she had a larger calling to “be a servant and love others and show people who Jesus is” but this was not dependent on a certain occupation. Amy clarified in a later interview:

.... I guess the reason why I’m feeling weird about the word calling is because I feel like I probably won’t spend my entire life teaching. I want to do lots of other things that I feel like I would be good at ... so I wouldn’t want to say, “Oh, teaching is my calling,” but I’m going to go and do all of these other things too. So maybe you can have more than one calling.... I guess I checked calling [on the questionnaire] because I felt like it was something that the Lord had led me into and that I had found I could use my gifts in, but ... thinking about it more, didn’t want to limit myself to just it being my one calling, you know, because I have lots of other desires of things that I would like to do too ...

In these ways, Amy found the word “calling” to be restricting. She said, “I don’t think that if you don’t find your calling ... then God’s not going to make you successful in your life.” Amy did not believe God would limit someone “to one thing that’s your calling.”

Amy believed everyone has certain gifts or strengths and “using those strengths that you have is kind of like following your calling.” She described honoring God by using her gifts or her natural aptitude. She enjoyed school and working with children and was comfortable speaking in front of groups, and teaching seemed to be a profession that utilized those qualities. Amy felt she was “gifted in leading and teaching” and could see herself teaching other ages at some point in her life. She recognized her potential as a teacher as she observed her high school teachers and realized she could “step into those shoes.”

For Amy, calling was defined in terms of her relationship with God, guidance from God, her natural gifting, and her connection and service to others. I wondered if Amy felt like she could fulfill this sense of a greater calling (service, love, and showing “who Jesus is”) in a public school setting. She stated:

... teaching is such a relational profession and so through those relationships, even just living out what I believe is kind of a testament to that. And so even if I don’t get to specifically have a conversation with these kids or have the ability to talk to them about it [her relationship with God], it’s still something that I can show them, that love. The love that God has poured out on me, I can give that to them and even if I don’t have the opportunity to actually have in depth conversations with them about it.

The details surrounding how service and love were enacted in her teaching will be discussed in chapter five.

Mary

I don't know [if] there's any way to know that this is for sure, 100% what [God] wants me to do, but I have a good feeling ...

Like Amy, Mary communicated a connection between her teaching, Christian faith, and calling. Unlike Amy, Mary was more comfortable using the word calling, saying, “I can’t think of another [word] that really says the same thing that calling does.” Mary defined calling as “what you feel like God has told you to do, the purpose that He has given you in your life.” She believed God chose people to fulfill certain tasks, but did not mandate these tasks; God gave everyone choices within certain parameters.

Mary further described calling in relationship to individual gifting saying, “He [God] gives us certain gifts so that we can use those for the purpose that He has for our life here.” She clarified that there was not one purpose, but many purposes for her life, which were also linked to her desires. Mary considered herself to be “good with” children and also described herself as very creative, and she was hoping to use these abilities in teaching. She had chosen to teach during this time in her life, but said God would have been “happy” if she had chosen something else.

Mary’s description of calling also included a ministry-focused definition that framed calling as a way to glorify God. She recalled speaking at a church regarding calling and missionary work and said that people did not have to be a missionary, in the traditional sense, for God to use them. They could glorify God in their “everyday” lives or their “everyday” jobs. She stated:

... I felt like that my calling was to be a teacher, and I didn’t have to go somewhere to do God’s work. I could do God’s work as a teacher, because I feel like that’s what He wanted for me to do and that ties in with the missions part of it I guess.

When it came to the role of calling in the workplace, Mary admitted to “still figuring that out.” She said she wanted to “stand out to people” and hoped others “would see something that’s different in me.” She realized that she could not proselytize in a public school and was still coming to terms with calling in relationship to her faith and what that meant for her in the workplace.

Mary could not separate her calling from her faith, yet recognized a non-religious person could also see teaching as a calling (by having similar gifts). During our second interview, I asked Mary if she felt God had called her to teach. She said:

I think so, I mean, I’d like to think so. I feel like He has put me in many situations that has confirmed that for me. I don’t know [if] there’s any way to know that this is for sure, 100% what He wants me to do, but I have a good feeling and I have—I mean, I feel like, and if I want to do it, He’s obviously going to support me in it and bless me in it and so—I mean, it may not be 100% what He was like, “You are going to do this,” but I think it’ll work. I don’t know.

Mary’s answers regarding calling sometimes varied. During our initial interview, she expressed a greater certainty in regard to being called to teach, stating that teaching was “a calling” on her life. After that, she acknowledged that she was constructing some of her answers “on the spot.” She did not believe she had answered anything untruthfully, but recognized that she was reflecting on some of the questions for the first time.

Mary seemed to separate or compartmentalize her Christian faith from her teaching, or at least attempt to, more than the others. She said, “It’s always in the back of my mind ... okay, this is what God wants me doing, but at the same time, it’s also a career.” During one interview, she talked about moments during her student teaching when she wondered about her elementary

student's religious beliefs—wondering if the students prayed, etc. I asked her what she did in those moments, what goes on in her mind. She said:

... I don't know I just kind of push it away, and I'm like I can't talk about that. I don't want to get in trouble. This is not the right environment for that. I just kind of have to push it out of my mind. But at the same time, I don't by any means think it's bad to think that while I'm there, obviously. And I feel like in some situations, maybe how I could word something would be okay to say. But at this point in my career where I'm student teaching, and I'm not really a teacher and these aren't technically—it's not my classroom, and I'm not hired here. I feel like it's definitely not my place right now, because I don't want to risk anything so I stay far away from the boundary so that I don't cross it.

Mary framed calling in terms of her gifting, desires, and efforts to demonstrate God's love to others. Despite the conflation of her religious beliefs and her approach to her students, Mary articulated an understanding, or perhaps a desire, to keep the public space of teaching separate. Even though her religious faith was on her mind while teaching, she articulated that teaching was an occupation and in a separate sphere from her religious beliefs. Mary admitted that at times she was contradicting herself in the interviews, but I think this speaks to the complexity and messiness of identity and personal and professional roles. Mary understood that the public space was public, and that her religious beliefs had no overt place there. Yet, she also acknowledged the ways her religious understandings affected her thoughts about teaching and the classroom. Again, I view this more as a tension—between our private and public selves—than necessarily a contradiction.

Sarah

*I feel that my calling is very centralized – it's very concrete.
I feel like I am called to teach elementary students in public schools ...*

Of all the participants, it was Sarah who was the most certain about her calling to teach. She defined calling as a desire “placed in your heart since birth.” Sarah confidently said:

... My calling would be teaching, and so I just believe that when He [God] created me, that was what He had in mind for me, and so despite any things that would happen, I guess it's kind of like the idea of fate, that was just how my life would end up going. That's how I feel.

Sarah also specifically felt called to teach elementary students because she has a “need” to “be there for students and provide that passion for learning right from the start.”

At first, Sarah stated that she could separate her calling from her religious faith, but then she said that it was “tricky” to try to do so. Since teaching was a result of God's design (the way God created her), she connected her desire to teach to her personality. In other words, even if she did not identify as religious or Christian, she could envision her life still leading to teaching. But again, since she viewed God as the one who created her to be this way, she really could not separate calling from her gifting or God's design.

Sarah's views on calling influenced her approach to relationships with students and her co-workers. She mentioned again how she viewed the horizontal axis of the cross as a reminder of how her Christian faith was to influence her relationships with others. Sarah said:

I'm not as good at it as I should be necessarily, but I do try to make it my goal, not to force other people into hearing my beliefs at all, but just to—like I've been saying, to love them and to show them that they're loved even though they don't feel like it, or if they don't feel like there's any point to life. I just want to give hope to other people and let

them see that I'm living my life, and I'm loving it, and it's because I know that I'm doing what I am meant to do and all of that stuff.

In chapter five, I go into greater detail regarding how Sarah viewed and enacted love in her teaching. She made a connection between viewing teaching as a calling and being continuously mindful of how she presented herself to students and other teachers.

By viewing teaching in this way, and having a high degree of certainty that teaching was her calling, Sarah felt God would help her during challenging days in the classroom. She said: ... God is going to provide the strength every single day for me to get through it, and I already see that in student teaching, because it's so easy to get burnt out being a teacher and doing nine hour days plus and dealing with 22 kids and all that stuff.... I just know that since it's my calling, and it's what I want most in life ... I know the end result is going to be beneficial, because I'm supposed to be doing it and so it makes it completely worthwhile for me.

Sarah said typically she gets discouraged when she experiences setbacks or the “tiniest failure in life.” But with teaching, it was different. She described teaching a “horrible lesson” during her student teaching that “bombed.” Instead of being self-critical, she felt like it was “no big deal,” and viewed her resilience as confirmation that teaching was what she was “supposed to be doing.” She was able to change the lesson, and said she “picked up and kept going and kept smiling.” Sarah said, “This is the one thing [teaching] in my life ... that I'm very, very positive about.”

She also mentioned the affirmation of others in regard to her teaching. Sarah was encouraged by student feedback and interactions that led her to believe students were learning and also felt loved by her. Other teachers congratulated and thanked her for her hard work in the

classroom; they said she was going to be “a great teacher” and her university supervisor affirmed her in similar ways. Even Sarah’s parents commented on how well she was handling the student teaching semester and noticed how Sarah viewed student teaching as her job, not as a college requirement. Lastly, Sarah’s daily reflections on teaching helped confirm that she was succeeding in the classroom. All these voices helped to reaffirm to Sarah that teaching was her calling.

Olivia

*I think calling means what you have a passion for,
what you feel like you would not be okay not doing.*

Olivia viewed calling as “what you have a passion for,” but calling was not contingent on an occupation. For Olivia, calling was:

... what you feel like you would not be okay not doing ... You know you’re supposed to be in that field or in that specific area, it doesn’t even have to be a specific job, it can be a specific place, it could be a specific ... environment or anything like that, and so I think it’s somewhere where you really feel you’re supposed to be.

Olivia’s views on calling were influenced by her Christian background and the belief that she answered “to God and that He has a plan” for her life. She believed that plan, or calling, comes from God and her relationship with Him. Olivia acknowledged that sometimes discovering your calling can be challenging. She said:

I think sometimes you can think you have a calling, it can get confusing sometimes ... people might confuse ... what I think I really want to do and go try it, and then it just doesn’t really work out for some reason. And they’re like, “Oh well, maybe I’m *not* called to do that.” I’ve heard people say that a lot, “Maybe I’m not called to do that. Maybe I’m called to do something else.” And so I think sometimes we can get in the mix

of ... what does calling actually mean? Which is interesting, and we think well, maybe I'm calling myself to that, maybe that's not actually "calling."

For Olivia, the decision to go into teaching elementary school was gradual. She enjoyed school, and "really liked working with kids," and grew to realize that she was "good" at teaching. Olivia described when "passion and the gifting go hand in hand":

... so you could say that the should [the decision to become a teacher] comes from realizing you're good at something or from people even giving you input on, "Oh, you're really good at working with kids." And then you say, "Oh, wow. Well my passion, what I really enjoy doing, people are telling me I'm doing a good job at" or "I'm seeing the results that I'm doing a good job at this, so I should probably do this."

Olivia also described getting comments from others on the negative aspects of teaching. She said when some people heard she was graduating with a degree in early childhood, they would tell her to "get out now" or ask, "Why are you doing *that*?" These negative comments made Olivia feel more strongly that teaching was her calling because she was able to articulate her reasons for wanting to teach; she was able to withstand and counter the criticism.

In fact, Olivia had never planned on becoming an elementary teacher. She had originally started college as an English education major, but switched to early childhood after a positive experience in one of her education classes that involved teaching young children. It was a process of understanding and realization. She described it as, "coming to terms ... with yourself and understanding that really is what you're called to do.... I believe that even if you try to go all these different ways, you're going to end up right back where your calling is."

Olivia went on to describe how calling was interwoven with her Christian faith, saying, she was "meant to teach to help people." However, Olivia viewed her teaching calling as a gift

that could be used in different ways or in different occupations saying, “My calling I know is to teach, but that doesn’t necessarily mean to be an elementary teacher.” She explained:

I know I’m meant to teach to help people, whether it’s academic education or whether it’s another form, whether it’s religious education or whether it’s just social skills and character education and things like that. Teaching, helping someone else get to a different point to gain knowledge or understanding in something, I feel like I’m called to teach and then from there, what I have enjoyed doing is being around kids and being in a school and using that calling of teaching in that form, if that makes sense.

Since Olivia viewed teaching as a calling, she did not “take [it] lightly.” She felt that teaching was what “the Lord” was “leading” her to do. Teaching in general, and in this context—teaching elementary students, was not just a job to provide income:

.... it is my job to help people in any way I can, and I think it makes me take it really seriously.... I know, I have worked hard for it [becoming a teacher], I know that, but I know it’s also something that I can’t not do. I have to do it ... and I know how many people’s lives I’m affecting through that, so I think I would take it really seriously.

Olivia hoped her students would be able to see her commitment and view her as a positive, encouraging teacher who “wanted to be there” [in the classroom with them].

Looking Across

As I looked across the stories of the participants, three commonalities emerged. First, they described teaching as a calling in terms of their innate abilities or gifting. Secondly, all participants (with the exception of Sarah) did not permanently link calling with teaching—calling was more nuanced and influenced by God’s guidance. Lastly, the participants framed calling in a way that aligned with their desire to teach.

Gifting and Calling

When it came to viewing teaching as a calling, all the participants linked calling with innate skills or “gifts” which led them to their work with children and education. Amy believed God gave individuals certain “gifts” and “using those strengths that you have is kind of like following your calling.” She said, “I feel like I’m good with people and I love to have relationships and that sort of thing so I think that kind of turned my focus towards the teaching realm.” Mary said God gives us “certain gifts” to use for the purpose “He has for our life,” but clarified that there was not just “one purpose” for her life. Sarah believed she was created with a natural ability to teach and said, “... With the whole calling thing, I really think that it’s just this innate gift in me to be able to interact with children ...” Olivia used the word “passion” to describe “calling,” and linked it to what she was “good at.” She described her journey to teaching as result of enjoying “being around” and “working with kids,” and said, “I think that’s where ... the passion and the gifting go hand in hand.... realizing I’m good at this, which is hard to do sometimes because you don’t want to brag on yourself.” Olivia talked about how others reinforced her perception of her ability to teach telling her, “... oh, you’re really good at working with kids.” Again, the participants linked calling to their natural ability (or gifting) to teach and work with children.

The Nuances of Calling

Even though they all associated calling with innate ability, there were still differences and complexities to their definitions and understandings. The first time I realized the complexity of calling was during my second interview with Amy, who explained that calling was not a word she “used that much.” When she did use the term, it was more in reference to a specific

situation, not an occupation. Calling was associated with instances when she felt clear direction from God and connected to larger purposes in her life. She stated:

Generally, I feel like I have a calling to be a servant and love others and show people who Jesus is and that sort of thing, generally. And I guess more specific is like, one of the ways that I—I guess I've chosen to do that has been through teaching.... I guess I kind of feel like because teaching is sort of encompassed in what I feel called to do ... I guess the reason why I'm feeling weird about the word calling is because I feel like I probably won't spend my entire life teaching ...

In other words, teaching could be considered under the greater calling for her life (to be a servant and love others) and a reflection of her gifts and overall sense of purpose. Amy said, "I guess I checked calling [on the questionnaire] because I felt like it was something that the Lord had led me into, and that I had found I could use my gifts in ..."

Mary also described her decision to teach as a process led by God. Even though she could not state definitively, or consistently, that she felt "called to teach," she did believe God placed her "in many situations "that "confirmed" teaching was her calling. Similarly, Olivia felt God led her to the teaching profession. However, she saw her calling as her passion to teach in general, and not contingent on any particular setting or occupation. Teaching was also something that aligned with her greater purpose to help others. She explained, "I see it as like you're helping someone else understand something, you're helping them get from one point to another point that they don't understand yet." However, this was not restricted to teaching children or to teaching as an occupation.

It was only Sarah who stated unequivocally that she was "called to teach elementary students in public schools." For the others, a specific calling, such as teaching, was likely to

change over time. “Calling” could include a sense of guidance from God toward an occupation, a reference to a more general gifting or ability, or a greater sense of purpose like loving or serving others. There were nuances to their definitions, and “calling” was not always fixed.

Desire and Calling

Lastly, calling was linked to desire and choice. Amy said, “I feel like I’m good with people, and I love to have relationships ... so I think that kind of turned my focus towards the teaching realm.” Teaching was a choice that flowed out of her desires. Amy believed individuals did not need to be overly concerned with finding a calling and said:

I guess I just feel like, that with a calling, a lot of times people are like, “This is my calling.” And I just don’t—I feel like it’s a little limiting I guess ... I don’t think that if you *don’t* find your calling, then you’re not going to be—then God’s *not* going to make you successful in your life, you know what I mean? So I think that you can’t mess up God’s plan, even if you are—I think that he doesn’t have limits and so if you—I don’t think he’s going to limit you to one thing that’s your calling ...

For Amy, individual choice was a part of the complexity of calling. She talked about not wanting to limit herself to “one calling” saying, “I have lots of other desires of things that I would like to do ...”

Mary also talked about her views regarding God and choice. Even though she defined calling as “what you feel like God has told you to do, the purpose that He has given you in your life,” Mary did not believe God mandated these purposes or tasks. She explained:

... my Dad describes it in this awesome little analogy where he says, God gives you a fence, boundary inside a playground ... you can play on the slide or you can play on the swings or you can play on whatever part of the playground you want as long as you stay

within the boundaries.... I'm sure there's things that people are better at than other things, like I don't know, maybe I'm better at teaching than my little brother is, something like that ...

Mary talked about how her gifting and desires were related. She said, "I think [my purpose in life] ... has to do with my giftings and ... the desires that He's given me. I desire to teach, and I don't think He would have given me that desire if it wasn't something He wanted me to do." In other words, God's purpose aligned with Mary's gifting, choices, and desires.

Sarah was very driven by her desire or "passion" to teach. She described her calling as a teacher stating:

I've always referred to it as just my passion, and that's what I'm very, very passionate about. That's what my heart yearns for, if you want to be poetic or something. But that's always how I've called it. I have the majority of my life called it a calling, or a gift from God, is what I would refer to it as.

Again, there was the expression of a desire to teach that was interwoven with calling. Olivia also referred to teaching as a "passion." As stated earlier, Olivia talked about how passion and gifting go hand in hand.

Looking across the participants' stories helped provide insight to how calling was linked to religious understandings. These understandings included beliefs about God-given abilities, life purpose, relationship with and guidance from God, as well as personal choice and desire. There is limited research on what calling means to teachers, and these women provide some insight to how calling is understood and framed.

Connections to the Literature

Mission and Teacher Identity

Defining calling was at times messy and complicated. Part of this complexity was perhaps due to my efforts to ascribe a closed-ended definition to calling, when the term encompasses an idea or concept that proved to be more fluid. For the participants, calling elicited issues of identity. Their religious selves influenced their understandings regarding calling, purpose, and teaching. During my interviews with the participants, I often thought of Korthagen's (2004) model (see Figure 1) that speaks to the power of purpose or mission in teaching.

Korthagen states that the core level of mission for teachers influences other aspects of teaching (Korthagen, 2004) and is "about giving meaning to one's own existence.... we are talking about deeply felt, personal values that the person regards as inextricably bound up with his or her existence" (p. 85). I saw this type of mission reflected in the way the participants spoke of their Christian faith and in the way they approached teaching with earnestness. They had a sense of guidance and purpose as teachers, which connected to their Christian understandings and identity. Amy said:

Generally, I feel like I have a calling to be a servant and love others and show people who Jesus is and that sort of thing, generally. And I guess more specific is like, one of the ways that I—I guess I've chosen to do that has been through teaching ...

Teaching was a choice for Amy, but still connected to her purpose as understood through the lens of her Christian faith. As Amy told me during our first interview, her relationship with Jesus Christ "transforms" her life, and she has to "live it out" by striving to be more Christ-like and communicating with Him. This mission influenced every aspect of her life.

Amy spoke of God's help with teaching and believed her relationship with God would make the environment more positive and caused her to commit to holding herself to an "extra" [high] standard. Her "positive outlook" was a result of her being a Christian, and she saw this influencing her teaching:

... I feel like I have more endurance through it because of that, because I feel like it's—because what I'm doing is glorifying to God, I guess. So that, I guess that's how I've seen it play out, that I have been able to—I feel like it's made it a better experience because I have a purpose for why I'm doing it, you know what I mean? I'm serving God, and I'm loving these kids because—I mean, because of God and that sort of thing, because of Jesus.

Amy's description of purpose and service to God aligns well with Korthagen's model.

Mary also described her relationship with God as a daily influence and spoke of how she started her day on the way to her student teaching assignment. She said she would play Christian songs on the way to her placement:

I feel like I'm having my own little worship time by myself in my car, and it's not always like I'm completely paying attention to the music, and I'm like full on worshipping God—like it is sometimes because it just is, but other times, it's just having that playing and reminding me that He's there and He's with me and I'm going to have a good day...

Mary said that during teaching, "it's always in the back of my mind of like, okay, this is what God wants me doing..." However, Mary was also quick to say, "It's also a career." She went back and forth regarding the fluidity and influence of her Christian understandings and her teaching. Regardless, it was clear that her Christian beliefs influenced her daily thoughts.

Sarah's sense of mission clearly influenced her approach to the classroom. She confidently stated that teaching is a "spiritual gift that I was given and that God put that desire in my heart to work with children and the ability to work with children." She said viewing teaching as a calling:

... has influenced it [student teaching] because it really is every single day I get up and know that I'm making a difference in these kids' lives, and that it's what I'm supposed to be doing, so it makes it easy to get through.... my boyfriend wakes up and doesn't want to go to work because he doesn't like what he does, and it's completely different for me. I've seen teachers that clearly do not feel the calling to be a teacher or at least have lost it because they dread it.... I feel so blessed that I have the calling, and I am so happy and it's such a fulfilling thing for me.

For Sarah, student teaching (as well as the interviews) revealed the degree of the connection between her religious understandings and her teaching. When asked if she saw her religious beliefs influence her student teaching, she said:

I did, and I think that a lot of it had to do with having these meetings every month and being able to talk about it honestly, because it made me think more about just religion in general and what it means to teaching and why I'm teaching and all of that stuff. And yeah, it's—I think also, aside from having the meetings and thinking about it more, I've just—it's been such a good experience that I can't help but feel completely blessed and realize that this whole past semester has been a God thing. The placement and everything, and I mean everything just lined up perfectly ... so it's made me more confident in what I'm supposed to be doing.... the past few years, I've had very strong religious experiences, but they have not connected with school. And yeah, now that I'm

student teaching, I've still felt as strongly religious, but I haven't been going to... [campus fellowship] as much, but I still feel it. That shows me that it's what I'm supposed to be doing I guess.

Again, for Sarah, her sense of purpose or mission influenced her beliefs and views in the classroom.

Olivia also mentioned how her religious beliefs or sense of calling influenced her student teaching experience. She said that even after she has a "bad day," her "passion and the understanding that this is what [she] really want[s] to do" helped her to start over the next day. Olivia said, "It really is something you're committed to, you're putting effort into, you're putting your heart in that. You're not just coming in and teaching what you need to teach and leaving, content-wise. You're really investing in these kids and you're really trying to get to know them..." She continued to explain her commitment by saying:

I think it can come from just knowing that this is what I want to do, that it's easy to be committed to something that you feel like you're supposed to do and want to do. Want to do and supposed to do are two different things ... I feel like it's really, really easy to be committed to something when you want to do it, and you're loving it, but I think it's also easy to be committed to something when you feel like you're supposed to do it.

Olivia's description of commitment reflects her core value, mission, or sense of calling in regard to teaching.

As demonstrated by the descriptions, mission or purpose filtered into their overall approach to their students and their classrooms. Korthagen's model focusing on the fluidity between levels of mission, identity, and competencies—were mirrored in the participants' stories.

Mission mattered to these women and was reflected in their lives and in their “call to teach.” The complexity and overlap of mission and calling raises questions on the many levels and influences in these women’s lives; which then raises questions about the limitations of using “calling” as a discrete term—when perhaps what it encompasses is not discrete at all.

Questioning “Calling”

When I first began this study about calling and religious understandings, I did not expect to have my participants complicate “calling” as much as they did. Even though there are clear commonalities in their definitions, there are also important differences. The complexity of unpacking calling raises questions about the literature that frames teaching in this way. In other words, education students and teachers may state on a questionnaire that they are “called to teach,” but the meaning of that calling could be notably different for each person. For Sarah, it was clear—calling meant teaching elementary students, but for the others, calling was not directly linked to an occupation. Hansen (1995) talks about “the Puritans’ distinction between a general and a particular call” (p. 5), and clearly, my participants defined the specifics of their call in different ways, and some made distinctions between a larger call and the specifics of teaching as a calling. This finding alone speaks to how problematic framing teaching as a calling can be.

For example, when Hartwick (2007) surveyed 882 teachers from the Wisconsin Public School system, he found the majority of the teachers viewed teaching as a calling. However, even with my *four* participants, differences emerged regarding what they meant by calling. As stated, there were similarities in the ways they linked calling to God-given abilities and gifting, but several of them struggled in articulating what viewing teaching as a calling meant for them. These moments made me wonder if calling is a useful term. There were times during the interviews when I wanted to stop using the word. Of course, since calling was built into my

research questions, I felt committed to my original inquiry. I did, however, do my best to ensure I was not forcing certain language onto the participants' views, and with the exception of Amy, the participants seemed comfortable with the term.

Discussion

Another Inherited Discourse?

To further complicate these questions about the utility of “calling,” I want to discuss how calling may be a part of what Britzman (2003) describes as the “inherited discourses” (p. 26) of teaching. These discourses “beckon and repel, promote and dispute, particular meanings about the work and the identity of the teacher” (p. 223). Viewing teaching as a calling seems to align with these discourses that communicate what it means to be a “good” teacher. Britzman states, “Like the ‘good’ woman, the ‘good’ teacher is positioned as self-sacrificing, kind, overworked, underpaid, and holding an unlimited reservoir of patience” (p. 28). This image often portrays woman teachers as utilizing their innate abilities and may result in them being viewed as either “martyrs” or “idiots” (p. 29). The women in my study linked calling to innate abilities and to acts of service and love. I go into detail regarding how they enacted love in their classrooms in chapter five, but clearly, calling as a teacher was often linked to a larger calling to serve, love, and help others.

Narratives of sacrifice and care are often associated with primary education, and these narratives endure for a reason, as many scholars (Apple, 1988; Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Grumet, 1988; Preston, 1993) have pointed to connections between teaching, childcare, and conceptions of femininity. Preston (1993) states, “Over the course of the nineteenth century ... teaching became women’s work not only statistically but ideologically and prescriptively as well, an activity no longer properly within the realm of male endeavor” (p. 532). The ideology

of domesticity influenced the argument that “the most effective teacher would draw upon the female qualities of emotionality, maternal love, gentleness, and moral superiority” (p. 532).

Horace Mann, the father of the Common School movement and Massachusetts’ secretary of education, believed women possessed these innate qualities that made them “natural” teachers of children (Mann, 1853). Mann weaved domesticity, childcare, and morality throughout his views on women and emphasized the strong correlation between women’s nature and teaching. He states:

... the most honorable and beneficent employment in civilized society is emphatically hers. I mean the education of children. That women should be the educator of children, I believe to be as much a requirement of nature as that she should be a mother of children. The teacher’s work is heart-work; -yea, in the very core of the heart. (Mann, 1853, pp. 82-83)

The idea of teaching as heart-work supports the narrative that women teachers are uniquely gifted to care for (and serve) children and even called to do so, and the participants’ views echoed this sentiment in the ways they linked calling with their innate abilities.

Despite this view that connects women’s abilities with teaching, women did not always dominate the teaching profession in the United States. According to Apple (1988), “men actually outnumbered women slightly” in teaching before the “rapid growth of mass elementary education, in 1870” (p. 58). But by the twentieth century, the statistics had drastically changed. Apple reports that in 1920, 89 percent of teachers in public elementary schools in the United States were women, and this female dominance continues today. For the 2011-2012 school year, this statistic prevailed, as again, 89 percent of elementary school teachers were female (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Schools and Staffing Survey*,

2011-2012). According to Biklin (1995), “We have only recently begun to look beyond taken-for-granted notions of women in teaching” (p. 171).

Attaching teaching to the essential nature of women has many benefits for those wanting to maintain patriarchal power. Esteemed maternal traits like self-sacrifice, devotion, submission, and long-suffering make for a desirable employee. Perpetuating the womanly ideal also makes sense economically. Carter (1992) states, “Women were expected to become teachers, not for the monetary rewards, but out of duty to God and community” (p. 128). One of the reasons Mann pushed for female teachers was this belief in women’s altruistic nature. Carter mentions an 1860 article, “The Female Teacher,” where Mann wrote, “... If ever I envied a mortal being upon earth, it would not be the queen, ... but ... the devoted, modest, female teacher, conscious of her duties, unconscious of ambition or earthly reward (p. 1860, 1578)” (p. 128). Carter believes it was this belief, that women were “naturally more altruistic than men,” that “continued to suppress female wages in the twentieth century” (p. 128). Bennett and LeCompte (1990) also describe the effect of economics on the decision to hire women teachers in the late nineteenth century. The feminization of teaching continued the practice of paying teachers low wages, since women were “willing to work for less than men” (p. 127).

I bring up the feminization of teaching to provide a brief background regarding where some of these gendered discourses may originate. After all, Britzman calls them “inherited” for a reason. For the women in my study these teaching discourses of sacrifice may be further solidified and magnified by their churches or religious communities. I discuss these religious discourses in chapter five, but I found that many of the narratives of sacrifice found in teaching are echoed in the narratives of sacrifice found in Christian teachings. Teaching as a calling may develop out of/in relation to an overall commitment to help and serve. Therefore, it is not

remarkable that Christian women who adopt these narratives, views, and discourses would be drawn to primary education.

Hansen (1995) makes a distinction between “the *vocation* proper” and a “‘sense’ of vocation” describing how there is a sense of “being drawn to the kind of work it represents” (p. 6). In other words, there are certain cultural understandings about teaching that draw individuals to the profession. Hansen states:

... the inner motivation to serve that a person may feel is socially rooted. It is not manufactured by the person out of thin air.... the call to teach comes from what they have seen and experienced *in* the world, not solely from what they may have “heard” in their inner heart and mind. The sense of being impelled to act from within is coterminous with a sense of being called by something without. (p. 6)

This calling from “without” may include the gendered discourses described above. According to Phillips (2011), “for women from conservative Christian backgrounds, the lens of interpreting vocational calling may differ from men’s because of a greater focus on relational identity, while men’s lens of interpretation may involve career-focused autonomy” (pp. 314-315). I argue that this relational gendered identity may influence women’s views on teaching as a calling. There may be a cultural expectation for a women teacher to feel called to teach.

Should a Teacher Be Called?

When I initially surveyed the education cohort of these women, most in that cohort affirmed that they felt “called to teach” or viewed teaching as “a calling.” I cannot speak to the other women’s decisions to identify with teaching in this way. However, the complexity of calling revealed in the participants’ interviews suggest that the idea of being called to teaching may be intertwined with the other prominent discourses mentioned above.

One incident that made me question the framing of calling occurred when the early childhood cohort completed the recruitment questionnaire. One of the questions was: “Do you feel ‘called to teach’ or do you consider teaching your calling?” One student responded, “No, unfortunately I do not believe teaching is what I was called to do.” Even though, she indicated earlier on the questionnaire that she wanted to go into the nursing field, I wondered about that “unfortunately.” Did this education student perceive an *expectation* to be “called” to teach? Was my question (by default) laden with judgment? In other words, “Do you feel ‘called to teach?’” or “Do you consider teaching your calling?,” may not be the best questions. These questions may be tantamount to asking, “Do you care about children?” or “Do you want to be a good teacher?” The prominent discourses surrounding primary education might make a participant hesitant to *not* identify with teaching as a calling.

Possible Consequences

Framing teaching as a calling can be problematic. First, defining calling is complicated and constructed differently according to individuals. Calling, for my participants, was in the most basic sense tied to innate ability, guidance from God, and service to others. If calling is associated with God-given design or direction, it would seem that an individual would be more willing to sacrifice in the context of that call. Sacrificing for, and loving others, is arguably a noble pursuit. However, I wonder about any narrative of primary education that furthers discourses of teachers as martyrs. Again, service to others is admirable (perhaps in this context even considered holy by the participants), but what does framing teaching in this way do to teachers? My concern is that it sets up unrealistic expectations toward a complex occupation and puts pressure on some education students and teachers to know “God’s will.”

For example, Harnett and Kline (2005) examine the problems that can occur for beginning Christian teachers who decide to leave the profession. A “sense of shame and guilt” (p. 9) is common for beginning teachers who leave the profession and these feelings are amplified for Christians who feel called to teach. When these teachers leave the profession, “they are terrified at the idea of having misread the will of God, disillusioned with faith, and shocked and depressed by the conditions they experienced in the classroom” (p. 10). Harnett and Kline claim teacher educators need to better equip students to differentiate between primary and secondary callings, specifically (but not exclusively) Christian students. They describe a Christian’s primary calling as his or her “communion with God;” any occupation would then be a secondary or “complementary” calling (p. 11). Harnett and Kline question framing teaching as a calling:

To consider the concept of a “call to teaching” then may be short sighted as well as inaccurate.... Making a distinction between primary and secondary callings may ease the pressure to get the “right” career and, if understood correctly, will prevent the fall from the call to teach. Certainly, this will help candidates avoid spiritual catastrophe as they explore the sometimes risky road of trying on occupations. If this notion of callings remains a confusing plethora of pressures, failure is certain and costly for candidates as well as their potential future students. (p. 19)

Teacher educators may or may not consider helping religious students make this distinction. This approach seems more likely at a Christian college than a public university, but regardless of the setting, teacher educators can examine discourses and meanings when students define teaching as their “calling.”

Another concern is how framing teaching as a calling may perpetuate the gendered idea of teaching as heart-work, and help to deprofessionalize the work of teachers. Biklen (1995) states teaching is often viewed as a low-status career, and sometimes not as a career at all. She describes a 1984 Brown University graduate whose “advisers equated a teaching career with a failure of ambition” (p. 22). Biklen refers to another teacher who felt the women’s movement made her even more aware of the low status of teaching. This teacher felt the message was: she “could do something ‘better,’ such as finding a position in ‘business management’ or administration, where the ‘pay is more and the status is better’” (p. 30). In addition to teaching’s low status, female teachers are often not viewed as exceptionally bright. Biklen (1995) states:

Women studying to be teachers at Yale ... before the university dropped its master of teaching program, revealed that while they were interested in the program, they “dreaded the ‘intellectual insult of being undergraduate education majors’” (Sarason, 1982, p. 65). (p. 28)

Portraying teachers as unintelligent aligns with Mann’s view that teaching is not an intellectual activity, but a heart activity. This discourse negatively impacts the status of the profession. The female teacher finds herself torn between these mixed messages of society. One message validates teaching as a traditional expression of femininity, while the counter message views teaching as a substandard profession. I question how the language of “calling”—often associated with spirituality or religion—may echo these gendered views of teaching as a profession. “Calling” is not inherently female, yet many professions often associated with calling tend to be service professions dominated by women—such as teaching, nursing, and social work. As long as teaching is linked to inherent female ability, the teaching profession seems less likely to be viewed as intellectual. The solution is not making the profession more “masculine,” but

recognizing the many gendered discourses adopted and inherited and their influence. Calling may be a part of these discourses, and should be troubled more by scholars and the teaching community.

Summary

As I have shown in this chapter, calling is a messy term—entangled in personal and social understandings, including religious and gendered discourses. As stated, there were times I questioned the utility of the term, but ultimately unpacking the nuances of calling helped to understand the import of meaning and mission to the women in this study. Exploring calling was the key that unlocked the door to conversations about the intersection of purpose and teaching. Once that door opened, I better understood the ways religious understandings were interwoven throughout their narratives of teaching. In the following chapter, I explore how their purposes associated with calling, such as loving and serving students, were enacted in their teaching.

CHAPTER 5

RELATIONSHIPS AND TEACHING

In this chapter, I explore how the women viewed teaching through a relational lens—focusing on serving and loving others. The relational aspect of teaching recurred in the interviews, and the participants’ intentions in these relationships were influenced by their religious understandings. A profession that involved caring for and serving others aligned with their greater sense of purpose in the world.

I begin with the participants’ stories about the relational aspects of teaching and how they viewed their roles as teachers. Then, I examine common themes found in their stories and how these themes connect to educational literature. Lastly, I argue that the participants’ personal and professional identities could not be separated, and discuss how Christian discourses support many of the discourses common to primary education.

Amy

I really hope that it [teaching] will lead to me building relationships with the students first ...

Teaching is relational, an important consideration for Amy and connected to her focus on loving others. She said, “I feel like I’m good with people and I love to have relationships ... so I think that kind of turned my focus towards the teaching realm.” For Amy, relationships were a key reason for wanting to teach, and the import of her relationships recurred throughout our interviews.

In fact, it was this focus on relationships that served to frame her teaching *and* her faith. First, Amy described her religious faith in terms of her personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

She explained that she was not comfortable with the use of the term “religion” because her faith was about her *relationship* with God and not about what she called “the more legalistic things of the church.” Amy’s religious beliefs impacted her daily life. She explained:

... a lot of it is striving to be more Christ-like and be more ... live in a manner the same way that He did and so a lot of that constitutes studying the Bible, really figuring out who He is and how we can do that ... just spending time with God in His presence because that’s what the Holy Spirit is for ... because I believe that He wants to talk with us, wants to communicate with us, wants to have that day to day relationship with us. So it’s striving to be Christ-like based on the things from the Bible but then also listening to the Lord and hearing what He’s saying ...

Amy felt God led her to her work within education, but teaching was just one part of her life directed by Him. Her religious identity, defined by her relationship with God, poured “out into the rest of [her] life.”

Her focus on relationships extended to how she viewed her role in schools. Through relationships with students and other teachers, Amy said she would be able to demonstrate God’s love. She also considered her ability to foster relationships a part of her gifting. She said:

I find it easy to be pretty selfless. I feel like that’s a gift because it’s not easy for a lot of people, and it’s not easy for me in all aspects of my life, but I guess in dealing with teaching and with kids and that sort of thing, I feel like it comes naturally for me to just give and give and give and do the best that I can for them.... I feel like I have ... a concern for their [students] well-being and for making sure that they are okay and really wanting to hear them and listen to them and hear what’s on their heart or what’s bothering them, stuff like that ...

Amy talked about her love for people and believed one of her strengths was “pursuing people and relationships.” She focused on being “intentional” so she did not lose friendships; relationships were a consistent priority for her.

During our first interview, I asked Amy why she wanted to become a teacher. She spoke about being gifted in leading and teaching, and talked about how she loved people. When I asked her how “loving people” would be enacted in her classroom, she mentioned the types of relationships she wanted to establish. She said:

So really valuing them [students] as a person and who they are, and I feel like if you form those relationships, then they have more of a trust in you and will be more willing to kind of listen to what you're saying, building that credibility with them ... I definitely see that and really just loving the kids first, and then teaching them and really giving them the tools to teach themselves.

Earlier she described the greater calling on her life as serving and loving people and telling “people about Jesus” and sharing “His love with people.” When I asked if she could do this in a public school setting, she talked about showing students love saying, “The love that God has poured out on me, I can give that to them.” I asked Amy, “What does that mean to you, to show them [students] love?” She explained:

Really just value them as a person, not just a student who’s supposed to be listening and be quiet in the halls and that sort of thing. Value—listen to them, give them advice, really show them that I want the best for them, and that’s the reason why I’m doing this. Teaching them these things and helping them in these areas of school is the best thing for them, and then also anything outside of school that I’m talking to them about. I’m

hoping that that's going to better them as well I guess. Just really, I think, respecting and valuing and caring for them and making sure I meet their needs and that sort of thing ... Amy talked about building "respectful relationships" with her students, relationships "where you care for them and listen to them and really treat them the way that they should be treated."

Amy's religious understandings influenced her approach to the morning meeting time with the elementary students in her student teaching placement. She discussed "themes" with the students such as: treating others "the way we want to be treated," being responsible for learning, appreciating differences, and being respectful of others. Amy said, "Definitely that morning meeting time has been affected by what I believe." She said, "My faith has impacted my relationships so much, the way that I handle relationships ... it impacts the way I teach about relationships too." Amy believed that the way people handle relationships is "an important part" of life, and stated this belief was "partially" due to her Christian faith.

Part of how Amy loved and cared for her students involved prayer. She said that she privately prayed for "their specific needs" and also prayed that "God would work through" her in their lives. When she was concerned about something students were experiencing in their lives, she often wished she could "do something" to help. She said, "All I feel like I can do is just pray for them and advise them and love them the best that I can. So I mean, a lot of my faith being played out in teaching is me loving them and caring about them."

Amy also mentioned how her faith influenced peer relationships at the elementary school. Sometimes during private conversations at school, she would mention her religious beliefs to other teachers. Amy said, "... but I feel like right now, I just need to encourage them [other teachers] and be like, you're doing a great job ... I really see that. Just kind of speaking life into who they are ... saying things that are really edifying to them." Clearly for Amy, relationships

were greatly influenced by her religious understandings and ways she envisioned loving others saying, “In the Bible, [it says] they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Amy explained that she believed many Christian women became teachers because teaching is “a lot about loving other people.” She said:

I think that to be a teacher, you have to be willing to sacrifice a lot and be pretty selfless, and that’s a characteristic of something that Christians pursue to be, is to be selfless and in order to serve others. So I think that’s definitely a big thing that maybe doesn’t initially draw them, but that’s something that you have to decide whether or not you can do that or it’s worth it to do that. And then also it’s just a lot about loving other people and I think that that’s—I mean, that’s the main thing that Christians are called to be known by I guess.... it makes it as an attractive occupation for Christians ...

Amy viewed service and sacrifice as an aspect of teaching that aligned with her religious understandings of loving others.

Mary

So I feel like just giving them unconditional love, even though—and I tell them, sometimes I am frustrated with them, and sometimes they’re not behaving well, but I still love them, and I’ve communicated that to them that I do.

Mary also talked about loving students as a part of her teaching related to her Christian faith. When I asked her what loving students meant, she said, “Caring for them and supporting them and just having a genuine ... desire to help them I guess.” We talked about the moments when she became cognizant of her religious beliefs during the school day, and she mentioned the moment of silence at school. She said:

I know that is a time where I’m praying either for my day, or for them [students], or for me, for strength to get through the day or just whatever, and so it kind of makes me

wonder. I wonder what they're doing then. And some of them obviously are just playing because they're only six, but I wonder if their parents have been like ... say a little prayer in the morning. Start your day off with that, or something. Like, I don't know what influence they have so I get kind of curious about that, and I wish I could talk to them about like hey, you can do that in the mornings during the moment of silence, but obviously I can't.

Mary described being ambivalent about the intersection of these thoughts and the public school setting. She said:

I don't know I just kind of push it [those thoughts] away, and I'm like I can't talk about that. I don't want to get in trouble. This is not the right environment for that. I just kind of have to push it out of my mind. But at the same time, I don't by any means think it's bad to think that while I'm there, obviously. And I feel like in some situations, maybe how I could word something would be okay to say.... I feel like it's definitely not my place right now, because I don't want to risk anything, so I stay far away from the boundary so that I don't cross it.

Her silent prayers for her students focused on a desire that "they would learn something" or that they would "have a good day." She also prayed that she would help them, what she described as "basic stuff." Mary did say there were times when her prayers were not general, and she would pray for a "specific situation."

I asked Mary about her actions in the classrooms connected to her faith, but that did not cross the "boundary" she described. She mentioned giving students unconditional love:

I feel like just loving them ... some of them are super loving and super—I don't know, I feel like some of them just become really attached ... some of them come up to me every

single day, and they need a hug from me I feel like. That's just how it comes across is they need that love from somebody, because they're not getting it at home. And I know one girl, for sure, that that is the reason. So I feel like just giving them unconditional love, even though—and I tell them, sometimes I am frustrated with them and sometimes they're not behaving well, but I still love them, and I've communicated that to them that I do ...

Mary admitted that it was “harder than” she thought to be “that happy person” in the classroom. She said that she had been “upset” with herself because there were times when she could not hide her negative emotions from the students. This challenge surprised her during her student teaching. She explained:

I didn't think it would be a problem, because I hadn't been in the school five days a week, and I hadn't been around them 24/7, and I love them. I really do, and I've completely enjoyed this experience [student teaching], but I do catch myself being negative some of the time, and I'm just like Mary, you can't treat them [students]—I mean, not that I'm treating them badly, but in my opinion, that's not the best way I could be treating them. And I don't know. I want to work on my presence around them and my emotion towards them, good and bad.... I'm obviously not going to be perfect at it at first but I mean, I still have a lot of learning to do but I think I'm doing all right.

Mary's desire to love her students included a positive expression of emotion. She described being able to “be nice to everyone” outside the classroom, but inside the classroom, she sometimes struggled:

I'm usually happy-go-lucky, and I love being around the kids, and it's easy to be fun and nice with them, but on days like today where by the end of the day, I was tired. I was

frustrated, which is human emotions. I feel like that happens, but I'm starting to realize that it's going to be a lot harder than I thought to keep up that standard that I want to hold to myself or on myself or whatever. Because of what I feel like God wants me to do here.

I asked Mary to describe what she feels God wants from her. She said:

I mean, I don't know. I feel like I could be more supportive of them [students]. I feel like I could be more ... supportive. I don't want to be a mean teacher.... I don't want to be mean to them, and I don't want them to see me as that. I want them to see me as someone who they know they can come to with any issue, they know that I will support them through whatever. They know that I'm there to help them and to teach them and to lead them on to better things in life. I don't know, and so I just hope that they do see me as that, and that they don't see me as like, I don't know—I'm worried that my emotions sometimes will ... take over more so.... I guess the whole wearing your emotions on your sleeve. I don't want them to see me upset or frustrated with them unless they need to. If one child is misbehaving and needs to see that I'm frustrated or disappointed, they can see that. But I don't want that to influence the whole class ...

Mary seemed to be processing her perceptions about God's expectations for her as a teacher. As with many of our talks, Mary often revealed what Britzman (2003) would describe as "the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become" and a time "when one's past, present, and future are set in dynamic tension" (p. 31). Mary did not have concrete answers to some of my questions, but demonstrated and shared her thoughts that were often in a state of flux. According to Britzman, part of the process of learning to teach involves "a struggle for voice" (p. 18). Britzman

describes the “dilemma of voice” borrowing from “W.E.B. Dubois’s ... notion of ‘double consciousness’” (p. 18). Britzman states:

This is the uncanny feeling of being caught by, even fragmented from, institutional pressures. It is a sense of being watched, and viewing the self through the eyes of others. But it is also the wishes one makes for existence and learning.... The conceptual category of voice, then, is that conflict between internal and external reality and narrating these conflictive events. (pp. 18-19)

Mary was honest about the conflict or challenge of her perceived self-expectations connected to her religious understandings. She said she might have a “warped view” of how she should act in the classroom, saying she was not “perfect.” Mary said, “I don’t even totally know what the standard is, but like maybe the positive interactions all the time and not getting upset with them isn’t healthy or isn’t normal or whatever.” Mary said she needed to look “deeper into it” and said:

I feel like God would share with me what exactly He wants me to do, but I feel like I need to do that again or more often, because I don’t really know. I mean, I do know, but that’s just kind of my version of what I feel like I’m supposed to do. But maybe that’s something I should look into more, is what exactly that looks like. I mean, I’ve thought about it obviously. I’ve thought, okay, I’m supposed to be the light. I’m supposed to be a positive influence. I’m supposed to—I mean, I don’t know. Yeah, that. But at the same time, a lot of teachers are Christians. Not just in the education program, a lot of teachers here [at the teaching placement] are openly Christian. So it’s interesting. I’m like, okay, maybe it’s more for the kids and just loving them in general. Because I feel like, I mean, Jesus did that. I feel like he just loved people and loved them whether they were poor

and covered in disease, or loved them whether they were rich and had everything they needed. So I don't know, maybe that's what I'm supposed to do is just love them. And be someone that they know truly cares about them, because I feel like in this area, not a lot of them have the best family situations and so maybe the steady constant thing that they can turn to.

For Mary, her understanding of God's expectations for her as a teacher connected to relationships. Even though she was still coming to terms with what unconditional love looked like in the classroom, her religious understanding were interwoven throughout these relational expectations and her role as a teacher and as a Christian. Sometimes this meant a conflict between the external and internal reality.

Sarah

... being a Christian teacher who feels called to be a teacher doesn't only influence the students, it influences the staff that I work with and the people I see every day ...

Earlier I described how Sarah described the Christian cross as a symbolic way to explain her faith. The vertical axis signified her relationship with God, and the horizontal axis represented her relationships and connection with others. When asked how her faith would influence her teaching, she replied:

I think that it just influences me in a way to continuously try to be mindful of how I love the kids, and how I present myself as a teacher to them and the teachers around me. Because ... being a Christian teacher who feels called to be a teacher doesn't only influence the students, it influences the staff that I work with, and the people I see every day, like I was saying with the cross thing going horizontal.

Like Mary, Sarah described not always meeting the expectations she had for herself in relationships. She said:

I'm not as good at it as I should be necessarily, but I do try to make it my goal, not to force other people into hearing my beliefs at all, but just to—like I've been saying, to love them and to show them that they're loved even though they don't feel like it, or if they don't feel like there's any point to life. I just want to give hope to other people and let them see that I'm living my life, and I'm loving it, and it's because I know that I'm doing what I am meant to do and all of that stuff.

For Sarah, “loving people” meant “having real conversations” and was connected to caring for others. She said:

... it means really caring about what the other person is saying and showing them that you don't forget what they just told you the day before, like little things ... one of my other peer teachers checked out for a doctor's appointment, and she didn't come in until two days later, and so I checked on her to see how she was doing. And another teacher's pregnant, so I like to talk to her about how that's going and just show that I'm genuinely interested, and same with the kids, to know when a kid is sick and honestly, especially with the kids, because it means so much to them when a teacher remembers what's going on in their life, because they know that they've got 22 other people competing with them in the classroom. To me, it just means being completely as genuine as possible with them and being there for them, supporting them and making them feel like an actual person instead of just somebody else that's in the classroom.

In another interview, I asked Sarah to further explain what it meant to love her students. Again, she described caring for students and getting to know them as individuals. Sarah said:

... loving my students isn't like just going up to them every day, and saying, “I love you” or anything. But it's just showing them that you care. If they're having a bad day, asking

them what's wrong or just asking them, genuinely, every day and trying to get to know them.... I think it was one of my teachers in high school or middle school, but they always said, it's my goal to get to know each of you a little bit every single day, and I thought that was really cool, because especially in high school when you have seven different classes of 20 kids, that's a lot of getting to know people. But I thought it was really neat that they wanted that, and that's always stuck in my mind, what I want to do. I would say actually spending time, investing in them.

During the first interview, Sarah described wanting to be a teacher because of her love and connection with children. She described wanting to put students on "the right track" and to "put a passion for learning and a love for life" in their minds. Sarah said, "I just want to be that compassionate teacher in their lives that they'll always remember and be thankful for, hopefully."

Sarah discussed the import of her relationships with her students, and how these relationships were both encouraging and distressing at times. She described how the relational aspects of teaching affected her:

Just the little things, like when they'll [students] come up and give you the biggest hug, and say, "I miss you." Or this past week when I was sick, and I had no voice on Monday, just seeing their level of respect for me, because I was so worried that they were going to overrun me, because they're six year olds.... they've been like ... "I'm glad you're feeling better" ... just sweet little things like that, every single day.... And then in the opposite direction, stand out situations where my heart's just completely broken for my students because one little girl this week, as she was leaving, she said something about how she likes school because everybody likes her at school, but at home only her dad

likes her. And that made ... my teacher and I almost cry as she was leaving because we just don't want her to feel like that. And another student crying because their mom moved away to California just recently with her brothers, and situations like that where they're just—they're six years old, and you don't think that they should have to deal with those things. It's just really hard.

Sarah said she did not "hesitate at all" to tell students "they are loved," and she valued having the opportunity to help students when they have a "really bad day." Sarah described a young boy in her student teaching placement who "keeps getting in trouble." She said:

... he just is so mad at himself because he keeps getting in trouble in classes, and that he just wishes he was a different person. And being able to take that and make it a teachable moment in the sense that, you're not an awful person. You're a wonderful student.... I see this in you, and I know that you're not an awful person, and sure you might talk too much in class when you're not supposed to, and you might come across as being disrespectful, but the bottom line is that you're a really loving person, and that's why you keep getting in trouble because you keep talking all the time and stuff like that. And getting to turn their sadness into personal empowerment for them and seeing it carry them through the day and hearing them in return saying, "You're so nice. Thank you for saying that to me." It's just—even the really sucky situations are able to turn around slightly or at least make me pour my heart out more for them and in return, also, even though they don't know it, praying for them and just feeling reassured that God's hand is over them, even though I can't do anything about it.

Sarah mentioned her personal prayers as a way she incorporated her religious understandings into her teaching and relationships. She said sometimes she would say a quick, silent prayer for a student who was having a “tough day” and described this practice as her “normal life.”

When it came to the intersection of her teaching and her faith, she said that she does not “get up and think about God and teaching together.” However, she does wake up and think, “I can do this. It’s going to be a great day, and I’m going to be this influence on their [students’] life.” She further explained:

... and so for me, it’s not so much of a religious thought in my head, but when you actually nail it down, it is a religious thought. It’s the fact that teaching is what I want to do, and being there for those kids is what my whole goal every single day is, and so technically, it’s because of my religion that I’m doing that every day. And it definitely intersects with my day quite often. Oh, I really feel for this kid, I need to pray for him, or just thinking about how blessed I feel multiple times throughout the day or just having to take a mental break as a teacher and being overwhelmed and being like, okay, and meditate almost for a second and having a moment of prayer kind of thing.

In our final interview, Sarah summarized how these relationships were interwoven with her sense of calling. She said, “My calling is to make them [students] feel loved and important and know that they can succeed ...”

Olivia

I want to be that figure in their life that they realize, somebody cares about them and wants them to succeed and wants them to get to the next step.

In terms of her relationships in the classroom, Olivia described wanting students to understand that she cares for them. She viewed her role as a teacher in terms of being a mentor, someone who “sits between teacher and friend.” Olivia said it was not enough to teach content,

and said, "... You don't want to just be the person teaching them math or the person teaching them science. You want to have that relationship ...” She described how she envisioned herself as a teacher:

I would hope ... that I would be confident enough and knowledgeable enough to teach them their academic subjects, to get them from one grade to the next academically. But more importantly.... I want them to grow emotionally and learn ... socially, I guess, learn things that way as they're growing too, from grade to grade, and it not be just school as we would call math and science and language and all that. But that they'll learn how to interact with people, that they'll learn how to get along, how to handle hard situations sometimes that happen. If two kids aren't getting along or they lose a friend in the middle of the year or just be a mediator. I hope to see myself as that and also as fun. I want the kids to have fun when they're here and when they're learning.

Olivia described the positive influence of her former teachers and how their support had been important to her. She wanted to help her students reach their goals and “passions,” but also wanted to “to love on kids and show them that there's someone in their lives that cares ...”

During one of the interviews, Olivia and I talked about her experiences in different Christian ministries. I asked her what her future involvement in ministry might look like. She said she was “really passionate for inner-city” or lower income areas where “obvious [socio-economic] needs” can be met. When Olivia described “meeting needs,” I commented that it sounded like she was describing ministry and teaching in similar ways. She agreed and said, “I do describe them the same, and I know I do, because to me, teaching can be my ministry in a sense, because those things that I'm passionate about are going to be present in the things that

I'm teaching." When I asked her what those things were, she replied, "The inner-city areas, the underprivileged kids, the physical needs."

I asked Olivia why she felt passionate toward students in that type of context. She said:
... I think because from a ministry aspect, not the teaching aspect, is that I know whether I have experienced as an individual the things they're going through, because I haven't, which we've talked about. My family is still together, my parents, still great. We've never struggled significantly money-wise. But because I've had experiences with people that have and helped people before and been in these situations, I feel like I can help more so, regardless if I've actually experienced it or not. Does that make sense?

Olivia said the desire to help came from her beliefs and background, and said, "It's just what I feel like I should do, and I want to do."

Olivia and I struggled to define "ministry," but settled on defining ministry (for her) as an act of service. She said that teaching was also an act of service and said:

... I think the difference is it's an act of service, and both are kind of an act of service without really expecting anything in return. I mean yes, you get paid for teaching, but besides that point, what you do outside of that where you are helping students, helping families, you're not expecting to get that in return as a teacher. And the same with ministry. But I think the difference is that underlying belief system in that, and the faith and the religious aspect of that, really is the difference, in my definition between ministry and teaching. It's not to say that teaching—it's hard because you can't say teaching's not a ministry, I guess depending on how you define ministry. I don't know what the dictionary definition of ministry is.... But if it is act of service ... then, yes.

Olivia clarified that with teaching, “there are limitations” on what she can say to students.

Sometimes she found those limitations “hard,” because of the import of her Christian faith in her life. She explained:

... it’s so much a part of me ... it’s never blatant big sign, I’m helping you because I want you to know Jesus. It’s never our goal is to convert you. Our goal is to love you like Christ loved us and hopefully through that, you’ll choose to do this, but that is not—if you’re not planning on it, we’re not going to help you. It’s not that at all. And so it’s strictly because of that’s who I am, and it’s hard for me not to talk about it sometimes.

For Olivia, loving students connected to her understanding of Christ’s love.

At the end of this interview, I asked Olivia more questions about her views on meeting students’ needs. I asked her, “What’s the difference between seeing kids as having all these needs versus seeing them as having a deficit?” She said:

... I think it depends on your mindset of it.... if you see it consistently as this person is lacking something, and I need to give it to them, or if you see it as like, I just want to help.... I think of it as ... a degrading sense and an uplifting sense. Like there’s nothing wrong with helping people, but you don’t want to force it on them either.... If you constantly look at it as somebody that has a deficit, that can’t get anywhere and can’t do something because of this, then yeah, I would see that as like a deficit. But if you look at it as, this is just kind of a block or a blockade that we’re going to get through, and it’s like a positive experience and a positive way of getting through it, then I don’t think it’s seen as a deficit. And I think of it too even in learning styles in a classroom. If you look at a student who might have lower learning disabilities or something and you just say well, they’re not going to learn anything because they’ve got this challenge, or they’ve got this

deficit in this case, or you look at it as, no this is just a block and we're going to have to work a little harder but we're going to get there. Then that's not—that doesn't make the student feel like they have a deficit at all. That just makes them feel like you really care enough to continue working with them and to get them and help them succeed. And I think it's the same way with those needs. That because you want to help or because you're helping, doesn't mean you see it as a deficit, it just means you see it as something you've got to get through. Because everybody has blocks and things they have to get through, and they look different, weaknesses or struggles or whatever. And they do look different from person to person, but that doesn't mean it's a deficit.

Olivia further described how she wanted to help students, even if it was only in a small way. She said, "... if you help a little bit where you can, you never know what that's going to do. And I think that brings up that whole faith thing back into teaching."

Looking Across

As the participants spoke of the import of their relationships in school settings, there were commonalities in their stories. First, they were reflective about their interactions with others and expressed a strong commitment to these relationships. They took their relationships in schools seriously. This included a focus on loving students, which was filtered through the lens of their Christian faith and often conflated with their views of their purposes and roles as Christian women.

Reflection and Commitment

The participants demonstrated mindfulness and dedication regarding their teaching relationships. As shown above, they had specific expectations regarding how they were to love

and care for others. Amy and Mary even communicated a standard for how they acted in relationships. Amy mentioned holding herself to God's standard and said:

... first, I will love everyone that I'm working with the best that I can, treat them the best that I can and show them that—almost that there's something different, there's a reason why I'm acting that way or whatnot. Just holding myself to a higher standard, to God's standard, because it's a little different than what a lot of people do. And then also, that I would love to take any opportunity that I get to share my faith with anybody there. I know that there's—honestly, it's been a lot more about me wanting to have opportunities to share with the teachers, because with the kids, I feel like the best thing I can do is just love them and care for them and listen to them ...

Amy understood the limitations of a public school setting in terms of sharing her faith with students and said, "... the best that I feel like I can do with the kids is ... show them the love of God..." and "value them as a person." Mary also communicated an expectation for herself that was informed by her religious understandings. Even though she was still unclear regarding the specifics of those expectations, she talked about the "standard" that she wanted to hold herself to because of what "God wants" her to do in the classroom.

Reflection and commitment continued as themes as Sarah described being continuously aware of her treatment of students and teachers. She said:

I think that it [being called by God to teach] just influences me in a way to continuously try to be mindful of how I love the kids, and how I present myself as a teacher to them and the teachers around me, because.... being a Christian teacher who feels called to be a teacher doesn't only influence the students, it influences the staff that

I work with and the people I see every day, like I was saying with the cross thing going horizontal.

Sarah was surprised when other education students left the program because “they couldn’t handle it.” She said, “I feel so strongly about this and I have since I was in kindergarten, that I knew I was going to be a teacher, and so that always shocked me.” Sarah’s desire or calling to be a teacher was “a huge part” of her life, and she felt a “drive” in her education classes to “get through all the assignments” because of her goal to become a teacher.

Olivia also talked about teaching as a responsibility she did not take “lightly” and described a strong commitment to the field. Despite the challenges of teaching, she said, “I really feel like this is where I’m supposed to be, and so that means, even if it’s hard, I’m not going to just want to work somewhere different.” She further described her commitment saying:

It’s that this is what I’m supposed to do with my life, this is what I’m going to do, and it is my job to help people in any way I can, and I think it makes me take it really seriously.... I have to do it ... and I know how many people’s lives I’m affecting through that, so I think I would take it really seriously.

All the participants demonstrated reflection about how they treated others in terms of their faith. Their interactions with others, their relationships, were often on their minds.

Christianity and Love

The other common thread in their stories was the way they talked about the enactment of love in their relationships. “Love” can be a nebulous term, and yet, one often used by teachers. The participants’ understandings about love and relationships are outlined in their stories above. Additionally, Table 5 reveals some of the ways the women described loving students.

Table 5

Participants' Definitions of Loving Students

Amy	Value, listen to them, give them advice, respecting and valuing and caring for them, meet their needs.
Mary	Caring for them, supporting them, having a genuine desire to help.
Sarah	Showing them that you care, trying to get to know them, investing “all of my energy and stay up every night late working my butt off to have awesome lesson plans for them.”
Olivia	Show them that there’s someone in their lives that cares.

Loving students was a priority for the participants. However, to be clear, some of the participants used the word “love” more than others, but the idea of being loving was interwoven in their stories. Amy talked about “valuing” students and “loving kids first” and stated:

... teaching is such a relational profession and so through those relationships, even just living out what I believe is kind of a testament to that. And so even if I don’t get to specifically have a conversation with these kids or have the ability to talk to them about it [her relationship with God], it’s still something that I can show them, that love. The love that God has poured out on me, I can give that to them and even if I don’t have the opportunity to actually have in depth conversations with them about it.

Mary also talked about “loving” students as a way she could incorporate her faith in her teaching. Sarah described her love for children and her desire to be a compassionate teacher. Olivia wanted to “love on kids and show them” that she cared.

The interviews revealed other relational goals, not defined specifically as “love” by the participants, but reflecting similar values. Amy said that teachers, like Christians, are meant to sacrifice, be selfless, and serve others. Mary felt most Christian women who seek “after a relationship with Jesus” are kind-hearted and want to help people and are perhaps influenced by

Jesus' example—He lived to help people, teach people, and also loved children. As previously mentioned, Olivia described teaching as “an act of service.” The participants understood their responsibility to help students learn academic skills and content, but beyond that, there was a sense of commitment to developing positive relationships with students that was intentional, and perhaps at times, sacrificial. These relational goals were often a reflection of how they envisioned Christian love.

Connections to the Literature

Relationships and Purpose

The import of the participants' relationships aligns with White's (2010) research indicating a connection between religious understandings and views on relationships in teaching. White's case study of three Christian teachers and three Jewish teachers found that every participant “indicated that the relationships they develop in life, especially those sustained in their religious communities, are what give their lives purpose” (p. 48). White claims:

The emphasis on relationships translated directly into the classrooms of the participants. Each teacher valued the role classroom community played in teacher and student interactions. They felt that without knowing each other through community, academic learning would not be maximized.

Of course, non-religious teachers may place an equally high value on classroom community. However, the teachers' religious understandings of relationships in White's study connected to the ways they viewed relationships in the classrooms, and my findings reflect similar connections.

This focus on relationships also connects with Christian educational literature about the role of Christian teachers in the workplace. Lee and Givens (2012) claim Christian teachers live

in a “relational world” (p. 207) and examine the ways Christian teachers can apply critical pedagogy in the classroom. They highlight the dispositions needed to be an effective teacher and claim:

... critical pedagogists emphasize some qualifications of an effective teacher, which are also called values, knowledge, dispositions as well as commitments. Lee (2007) identifies three dispositions of an effective teacher based on Jesus’ ministry in Matthew 4:23. Those three dispositions are compassion, competent, and commitment. (p. 204)

These dispositions focus on teachers having a “compassionate role toward students where the teacher serves and protects the wellbeing of her students” (p. 204). A “compassionate” teacher is described as someone who demonstrates “selfless acts” (p. 205). The authors link this to Freire’s belief that education is “an act of love” (p. 204) and claim:

Christ demonstrated compassion in all his encounters, dramatically changing the lives of all those who met him. Disregarding race, class, or culture, Jesus preferred the company of the oppressed (the woman at the well, the lowly outcasts with leprosy) rather than the approval of those in positions of power, as in his own Jewish leaders. (p. 205)

This text reminds me of how the participants talked about loving students, which included compassion, selflessness, and meeting students’ needs.

Lee and Givens (2012) claim, “Christ’s directives to address the needs of the oppressed reveal His own tremendous compassion for the disenfranchised, and one way that Christians have followed His example by ministering to marginalized populations is through education” (p. 205). Even though Lee and Given’s research is directed toward those involved in Christian or faith-based education, their research shows how perceptions of service and love may be interwoven in the relational roles of Christian teachers.

Love as Foundational

The intersection of Christian love and teaching is also addressed by Gregory (2002) in another Christian academic journal. He claims, “love is foundational” for teachers and states, “The law of love expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition helps teachers critique empty forms of love at the same time that it helps them employ productive forms of love in the classroom” (p. 9). Gregory goes on to explain love in the classroom and states:

Christianity views love not as a feeling, or not just as a feeling, but as a standard of conduct. For Christians, love may sometimes be a matter of how you feel, but it’s always a matter of what you do. Love is Christians’ most fundamental standard of behavior; they consider themselves made and judged by its law. Jesus articulates the law of love in *Matthew 22:36-40*- ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind’—as ‘the first and greatest commandment’. He also adds, ‘and the second [commandment] is like unto [the first], Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’. Finally, Jesus offers an even more stringent formulation of the law of love in *John 15:12* when he says, ‘This is my commandment, that ye love one another ‘*as I have loved you*’ (p. 12)

Gregory argues that teachers should focus on “agape” love with students. He believes this type of love “demands” that he, as a teacher, relate to students in the following ways:

... first, to be unconditionally committed to their good; second, to have regard for the well-being of all of them equally; and third, to be open to the possibility of self-sacrifice on their behalf, when and if appropriate circumstances demand it. (p. 17)

These Christian narratives of love and sacrifice are echoed in the participants’ stories and explanations of how they enact love in their relationships with students and other teachers.

Another Christian scholar, Baurain (2012), furthers the focus on Christian love and teaching in a study exploring how Christian ESOL teachers incorporate their religious beliefs in their teaching. He collected twenty-three questionnaires from respondents whose background was “a somewhat diverse sprinkling of evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations” (p. 318) and who were teaching in a variety of settings—public, private, religious non-profit, and adult education. Baurain found four main ways the participants incorporated their religious beliefs into their professional practice:

- (a) Christian love or charity, in the sense of acting for the good of others;
- (b) respect for persons, based on a high spiritual view of personhood;
- (c) student-centeredness as an outgrowth of religious convictions; and
- (d) Christian witness, that is, sharing one’s faith in ways appropriate to the context. (pp. 320-321)

Baurain’s participants “tended to group Christian love with related virtues, including compassion, trust, respect, patience, practical service, and social justice” (p. 321). Many of the teachers in his study wanted to specifically teach ESOL students because they “tend to be among the have-nots of the world” (p. 321).

The above literature echoes my participants’ understandings about their relational roles as Christians and teachers. All of the women in this study focused on loving students. As Amy said, “Loving people is the main thing that Christians are called to be known by...” Mary spoke about giving students “unconditional love.” Sarah explained, “My calling is to make them [students] feel loved and important and know that they can succeed.” Olivia said, “Our goal is to love you like Christ loved us.” The participants highly valued the part of teaching that included, in the general sense, loving others.

Similar Values

I asked the participants why Christian women are drawn to elementary education, and again, love and care were mentioned. Amy said:

... to be a teacher, you have to be willing to sacrifice a lot and be pretty selfless and that's a characteristic of something that Christians pursue to be, is to be selfless and in order to serve others. So I think that's definitely a big thing that maybe doesn't initially draw them [Christian women], but that's something that you have to decide whether or not you can do that or it's worth it to do that. And then also it's just a lot about loving other people, and I think that that's—I mean, that's the main thing that Christians are called to be known by I guess. In the Bible, they'll know that we are Christians by our love. And so since there's a lot of love that gets poured out through teaching also, I think that that's—it makes it as an attractive occupation for Christians, so some of those. And then I don't know, I'm not sure ...

Mary said:

... it makes me wonder if it's our nature because I feel like a Christian woman that seeks after God and seeks after a relationship with Jesus is by nature—I feel like most of us are kind-hearted, we want to help people, and I mean, I don't know ... maybe it's part of the fact that I guess the way Jesus lived is to help people and is to teach people and.... and He loved the children. It says that. And so maybe that's just part of our wiring, that's the part that we get from Him or something. I don't know. And so because that's coming out in us, we want to do that, we want to teach, we want to lead and help and nurture and care for. Those are all things you do as a mom but also as a teacher. I don't know, maybe that's part of it. I mean obviously there are people who aren't Christians who have that

same desire wired in them. They might not realize that it's from God, but maybe we just realize it and feel like that's what God wants us to do, and this is one way to do it. I don't think it's—it's obviously not the only way to do it. There's many other things we could do and still act out those same characteristics, but I don't know.

Sarah said:

... I just think it's because ... women tend to be more compassionate and caring, and I also think it has a lot of ties to the fact that it's a traditional role for women to play, and so it's kind of like when you're growing up, you're like, okay, I'm going to be a teacher or a nurse or something like that, is what a lot of girls think growing up. I'm sure that that has a lot to do with it. But I really would just say that when you have a compassion for working with children and you're a Christian and you just know that's where you want to go, because—that is an interesting question to ask, because it is very true to say that the majority of the education program is Christian women.

Sarah went on to say that:

... I want to say something along the lines of that when you're in the Christian religion, you're taught to be more loving and caring of everybody, and that for women, it's just stereotypical that they're more prone to work well with younger kids and stuff. I don't know. Because I know that personally for me, it's a calling, and I know that for a lot of other girls, they feel that way too and—but I also know that a lot of girls don't feel like necessarily it's a calling, they just know that they get along with kids and that they would do well teaching them. I don't know.

Olivia said:

I never thought about that before, never thought about the fact that—but when I start thinking about the people I know in my cohort, and I know most of them probably would say that they are [Christians]. But I know some that wouldn't.... I don't know why.

These explanations offer some insight into why certain Christian women may self-sort into primary education programs. Whether it is a focus on teaching as love or service, or teaching as compassion and care, or teaching as a traditional female role—the commonality of purpose and influence through relationships recurred in their stories.

Discussion

Expectations as a Woman Teacher

In the previous chapter, I discussed how calling may be another inherited discourse of teaching (Britzman, 2003), and interwoven with calling are the participants' understandings of relationships. Again, the idea of the “good teacher” as “self-sacrificing” and “kind” and “holding an unlimited reservoir of patience” (p. 28) is seen in how the participants viewed their relationships with students.

I think of Mary's struggle to be “that happy person” all the time in the classroom and her perceived expectation to always be positive. Mary's comment may reflect Grumet's (1988) claim that the notion of an ideal woman or an ideal mother is “extended into training and the work of the ideal teacher” (p. 43). This romanticized notion of teacher may contribute to Mary's self-judgment or self-expectations.

Perhaps this glorified image of teacher can be traced to the Common School Era when “across the country, churches, missionary societies, and organizations of reformers enlisted women in a vast crusade to provide the school with proper teachers” (McClellan, 1992, p. 24).

According to McClellan:

The primary task of the woman in the classroom was to exercise a strong moral influence on the child, reinforcing the lessons of the mother by both serving as a model and eliciting proper behavior from the child. The stakes were widely acknowledged to be high. “Instructors not only form a character for this world and one that will be estimated by men,” wrote one educator, “but likewise a character for eternity, and one that will be estimated by a holy and righteous God.” Like the mother herself, the teacher of the nineteenth century carried a heavy burden of moral responsibility. (pp. 24-25)

This description of a teacher’s accountability to God in the nineteenth century sounds very similar to Mary’s and Amy’s twenty-first century views on accountability in their teaching. The idea of a “heavy burden of moral responsibility” in teaching remains today, as Mary and Amy talked about holding themselves to a higher standard.

Again, linked to accountability and expectation is the notion of an ideal teacher, coupled with the belief that women are natural teachers of young children. However, this idea of innate ability can minimize the myriad of challenges teachers experience once in the classroom.

Preston (1993) examined journals and correspondence of women teachers from 1830 to 1880, and some of these writings countered the mother/teacher image so idealized. Preston states that not all the teachers “‘naturally’ loved children” and that the “conditions in schools, which constantly thwarted female teachers’ intellectual ambitions, caused more than a few to become contemptuous of their students” (p. 547). Agnes Walker, a teacher in Springfield, Massachusetts, wrote to friend in 1865 saying she had “‘a class of Dunces in Arithmetic that try the life out of me’” (p. 548). Preston found the teachers’ writings were “replete with reports of punishment” rather than proclamations of “maternal affection” (p. 549). In fact, Preston states

that women brought the same qualifications to the classroom that men had, “their intelligence and their ambition” (p. 551). She said the propaganda surrounding the innate qualities of women helped get women teachers hired and combated some of the prejudice against them, but women “were less docile, less ‘uniquely qualified’ than they were purported to be” (p. 551).

These inherited discourses frame teaching in a romanticized way, and yet the flip side of that coin is the solemn responsibility to God and man. These inherited discourses may be part of the reason Mary, and others, have certain expectations for their role and behavior as a teacher. My intent is not to call into question the participants’ ability or “gifting” with students, but to highlight how these discourses surrounding teaching can create environments where the challenges of teaching may not be freely discussed.

Conflation, Conflation, Conflation

Interestingly, Christian narratives of sacrifice seem similar to some of the inherited gendered discourses found in primary education. The most predominant narrative in Christianity is that of Jesus Christ dying on the cross, sacrificing his life for humanity’s redemption. Sacrificial love is highly valued in Christianity. When Amy says she finds it easy to be (pretty) selfless, I wonder about that statement. I do not doubt the veracity of her words, but question what negative consequences this may have for her in her role as a teacher. Again, many value and honor selflessness in an individual, but there are scholars, such as Gilligan (1982), who problematize the “moral equation of goodness with self-sacrifice” (p. 70). Gilligan states:

The notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice has complicated the course of women’s development by pitting the moral issue of goodness against the adult questions of responsibility and choice. In addition, the ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in

conflict with the concept of rights that has, in this past century, supported women's claims to a fair share of social justice. (p. 132)

Even though Amy's focus on selflessness and sacrifice may benefit students, I wonder what encourages this narrative that teachers *are called to* sacrifice as part of their professional duties.

Throughout the participants' stories are notions of teaching and religion linked to care, sacrifice, helping, and at times, mothering. The overlap of the *narratives of Christianity*, *narratives of teaching*, and *narratives of mothering* is striking. These narratives are so powerful, so ubiquitous, that it is difficult to imagine what other narratives of primary education would look like. Can primary education ever be separated from the moral work of a mother or from the narrative of teaching as self-sacrifice, care, and love? If the participants in this study are any indication, it does not look like these narratives have drastically changed since the Common School Era.

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Issues of Identity

The conflation of Christian and teaching narratives demonstrate the ways personal beliefs are interwoven with professional beliefs. The participants' views on their teaching relationships and roles in the classroom echoed their views on relationships and roles as understood through the lens of their Christian faith. According to Baurain (2012):

... spiritual and religious beliefs demonstrably find their way into how teachers know what they know and why they do what they do (White, 2009, 2010). Elements of personal faith might affect classroom decision making, relationships with students, professional development priorities, and overall pedagogy. Faith and spirituality must be considered aspects of the "complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg, 2003, p. 81) on which

teachers draw. An expansion in this area of the nexus among personal and professional beliefs, identities, and practices is overdue. (p. 313)

The participants' stories demonstrate how their personal and professional understandings inform the other. In the interviews, they described how their religious beliefs are a salient part of their identities. Amy said:

... I feel like I strive to live ... that even without me telling somebody that I'm a Christian and that I'm striving to be more like Jesus, I would want them to be able to see that in who I am without even saying that. You know what I mean? Or see just that there's something that's different, that's in my life. So, that's definitely... something that shapes my identity, I guess. Just really striving to be kind of set apart from a lot of the things in this world.... in my identity, it shapes the way that I would react to situations, how I deal with relationships, how I handle just different things in my life. So ... I guess I would want somebody to think of me and think I would not be offended ... I would be happy for people to think of me and say, "Oh, she's the girl who is really passionate about her faith and is a Christian and loves Jesus".... I guess even there are times where I haven't necessarily had relationships where they probably would have said that about me, just because I haven't necessarily always—I mean, throughout college, with all my relationships ... made that clear or acted that way or whatever and so for me ... I hate that I've had relationships where they don't know that about me. You know what I mean? Because that's something that's...kind of shapes who I am.

Mary said:

I would say my faith is part of my identity, what I believe in is part of my identity.... I guess just because I was raised with that faith, I believe that and so it's just—it's a big

part of me.... I feel like at some points in my life, it was stronger than others ... there's definitely times in my life where I just kind of ignored it ...

When I asked Sarah if she considered her religion or faith to be part of her identity, she said:

Yes, definitely. Whenever I list things about who I am, that's definitely in the top three, if not usually the top one. It's usually the first thing I would say. Depending on who I was talking to.

Olivia responded to the same question saying:

I definitely would. I think first off, if someone's just like, "Hi, I'm so and so," and I said my name, then it maybe wouldn't be, "Oh, nice to meet you, I'm a Christian".... I wouldn't really say that, but I think through the things that I would tell about myself, that would be important to me, you could pick up on it. Or if you didn't right away, it might be a question that you would ask based on what I've said, and so I think in that sense, it definitely is part of my identity and by no means, if somebody outright asked me, "Are you a Christian?" I'm not going to be afraid to answer. I would say, "Absolutely."

Their religion or Christian faith influenced how they perceived and named themselves. These descriptions align with Danielewicz's (2001) definition of identity as "how individuals know and name themselves ... and how they are recognized and regarded by others" (p. 3). Their stories also reflect Gee's (2000) definition of identity as being recognized as a "certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (p. 99). These women took their faith with them across contexts. Their personal and professional identities could not be separated; their *narratives about teaching* and *their narratives about being Christians* overlapped.

Summary

The participants' stories demonstrate the connection between their religious identities and their identities as teachers, especially in terms of their relationships at their schools. Their views on being loving toward others, as well as their sense of accountability and commitment, were informed by their Christian beliefs. These Christian relational understandings also sound remarkably similar to the inherited discourses common to primary education—as both focus on sacrifice, care, and meeting others' needs. These beliefs influenced their approaches to students and teachers and sometimes their assessment of self. At times, this ideal of “love” so prevalent in these discourses seemed like an unreachable goal. Understandings of service and sacrifice should be discussed, as they may create tension once in the profession. Teacher educators should examine these standards and help education students navigate these expectations (from within and without).

The participants' views on relationships were influenced by their Christian beliefs. In chapter six, I discuss other ways their Christian identity surfaced in the school setting and the import of the religious homogeneity of their cohort.

CHAPTER 6

JESUS AND RAINBOWS

In this chapter, I explore how the prevalence of Christianity within the education cohort, and at times within the elementary school contexts, influenced the participants' experiences and views regarding the intersection of teaching and their religious faith. One of the most memorable comments came from Mary when I asked her about her early childhood education classes. She mentioned that approximately "75 percent" or "80 percent" of students in her cohort were Christian, and remembered a non-Christian student's perspective on their group. Mary stated:

.... it's so weird that all of us—or most all of us are Christians ... going into this major ... I remember meeting this one girl ... she's in a cohort before me ... and she was complaining about how everything is Jesus and rainbows. And I was like, "What the heck?" That's so ridiculous. And she was just complaining that all they do in her cohort was talk about happy things all the time and Jesus, and I was like, "Why is that a bad thing?" But yeah, I don't know, it's funny that most people in this major are [Christian], which is very interesting.... I don't know why that reason is, but I guess that's kind of why you're studying it.

In this chapter, I examine this religious homogeneity as described by Mary. I begin with the participants' experiences within teacher education and highlight the commonalities in their stories. I discuss three contexts at play: the predominance of Christian beliefs *in their education cohort*; the predominance of Christian beliefs *in American culture and their faith communities*;

and the predominance of Christian beliefs *in American schooling*. These different contextual streams helped create a river of Christian perspective, often making other perspectives seem foreign. In other words, not only does early childhood education seem to attract Christian women, but once in education, Christian beliefs are also often found in the public school culture and in this case, the participants' surrounding communities. These contexts buttress each other and help explain why Christianity may be a taken for granted entity in education (Burke & Segall, 2011). I examine the possible positive and negative implications of this religious homogeneity within teacher education, and discuss the need to help education students understand different viewpoints and laws at the intersection of religion and teaching.

Amy

I had a really cool group of girls that I knew all also loved the Lord and wanted to ... had the same ideas ... as I did and we all really encouraged each other a lot and have really seen ... I guess sort of see teaching in a different light because of that.

During the interviews, I wanted to know if the participants ever mentioned their Christian faith in the context of their education classes. I was curious if they had a desire to share their faith in this type of setting, if they felt welcome to do so, and whether religious beliefs were discussed in the formal (or informal) curricula of teacher education. I asked Amy if her religious beliefs ever “came up” in her teacher education classes. She said:

I'm not sure if it came up in whole group discussions, but there was definitely, somehow or another, we ended up—I had a really cool group of girls that I knew all also loved the Lord and wanted to ... had the same ideas on—as I did, and we all really encouraged each other a lot and have really seen—I mean, I guess sort of see teaching in a different light because of that. And so I guess just because we spent so much time together, we had

classes together every day, all day, all the same classes. I guess just getting to know each other through that, and we did enough little presentations at the beginning of every semester where we talked about what was important to us and stuff like that, that we kind of—people in the class probably knew who believed what, because the people who really cared about it, shared that at the beginning or whatever.

Amy talked about getting to know the women in her cohort over the course of several semesters and coming to realize that many of them shared similar Christian beliefs.

During one of her practicum semesters, Amy began carpooling with two other women from her cohort. She stated that one of the education students in the carpool was a Christian (“Susan”), while the other was Jewish (“Kerri”). Amy described how religion became a topic of conversation during their commute. She said:

... the way that it first came up was that at the beginning ... the first or second day, the principal made a comment about God over the announcements which, it wasn't anything that was like offensive or anything ... and Susan made a comment about it in the car on the way home. And this girl, her name was Kerri, she was like.... talking about ... religious in the school always made her feel uncomfortable growing up because most people were the majority Christian, and she [Kerri] was like, “And I was Jewish, and I remember they made me be in a Christmas pageant and it was just terrible”—and all this stuff. And so then it ended up sparking conversation about being Jewish, and I was actually reading a book at the time about Israel and how Christians can love Israel as well, and that they're still God's chosen people. It was really interesting to me, so I talked to her a lot about it....

Amy asked Kerri if she could read from the Bible during their commute. Amy explained, “I said do you mind if we read from the Old Testament? And she was like, ‘Yeah, whatever. I guess.’ So I read ... Psalms and stuff.” Amy mentioned this daily practice to the in-service teacher with whom she was working. The teacher then shared with Amy that she attended church, and their conversation led to Amy praying for the healing of the teacher’s arthritic knee. The prayer, Amy clarified, was not in the presence of students.

Susan and Amy continued to carpool together during a subsequent semester. Kerri was then living in a different location and no longer joined them. Amy described the continuation of her relationship with Susan:

... Susan and I carpool together every day to [the school placement] and we both came into it being like okay, God has a plan for us being here. We don’t know exactly what it was, why are we driving 30 minutes when we could drive like five minutes every morning. We have still been reading the Bible every day on the way to school, and we pray for our teachers, and our kids and stuff every morning when we get there before we go to our classes. And then we both have just been really intentional again about trying to encourage our teachers and love them and then the kids too.

Amy said, “It’s been really cool that Susan and I have been able to encourage each other more constantly. On the way to school, on the way home from school ...”

When we talked about her education classes in her program, Amy did not experience tension due to her religious beliefs. She felt comfortable mentioning her faith during the classroom icebreaker activities and sometimes wrote about her religious beliefs in her writing class. She said that she did not receive any “negative feedback.” Amy did remember an education class outside her program where the professor made her feel “awful,” partially due to

her religious and political beliefs. But within her program, Amy said, “a lot of what my teachers were teaching me, although it wasn’t backed up by Christian ideals necessarily, it followed my beliefs ...” Amy mentioned a day in one of her classes when she was especially aware of her religious beliefs. She said:

I ... decided for some reason or another to do ... a one or two day fast ... for religious reasons.... and a lady came in to talk ... we were talking about creating a community in the classroom and ... somebody asked about ... snack in the classroom and kids that come in without any snack and what you do in that sort of situation where kids consistently every day don’t have any food except for the food that the school gives them.... But the lady basically was like, what I’ve always done in my classroom is that if you’re hungry, I’m going to feed you. She was like, can you imagine being a kid trying to sit through class hungry and trying to concentrate, and you can’t even concentrate, and I was sitting there really hungry and listening to that. And she was like if a child is hungry in my class, even if it’s going to cost me extra money, I’m going to feed them. I, after that, went and read some out of my Bible, and I can’t remember what I read but it was just some cool stuff that I really related with that, and I was like you know, that’s something that I know that Christians are called to be generous and giving and that sort of thing and so I really connected with that and was like, even though that might be a sacrifice on the teacher’s part, that’s even just one more act of generosity I feel like in that. That was kind of a conversation I remember that impacted me ...

I asked Amy if she had wanted more guidance from the education faculty regarding the intersection of her religious beliefs and teaching. She said, “I guess I was okay with what was

provided, especially because I had a lot of friends in my cohort who, we could discuss how they intersected rather than having a discussion with the teacher.”

During our final interview, I wondered if Amy had any advice for her instructors. I asked, “Regarding how faith and your teaching overlap, do you have any advice for faculty ... do you think that [religious belief] needs to be acknowledged more or are you okay with it, being sort of the way it is?” Amy said:

... it doesn't need to be necessarily acknowledged but ... if we are expected to be respectful and open-minded and have conversations and participate in discussions, then they need to be ... need to take the same approach and not be close-minded ... and immediately judge us based on what our beliefs are, you know? It needs to be reciprocated, that. And also ... it was neat to me that somebody e-mailed you and was able to bring up questions about teaching and her faith and that sort of thing. And so if there are teachers who are Christians, who specific faiths, then it would be neat for them to make that more known. Even though, I know that's at the expense of other students feeling uncomfortable, but then it would be neat for them to provide a support for those students I guess too.

Amy was the only participant who did *not* recommend that education faculty create more space to discuss the intersection of teaching and religious beliefs. The other women wanted to discuss their religious beliefs to a greater extent in their education courses.

Mary

... as soon as I got into the program, I was like, oh my gosh. This is awesome. We all pretty much have the same basic beliefs ... I just thought it was really interesting.

Mary said sharing the same religious beliefs made it “easier to relate to some” of the other education students in her cohort. However, she also mentioned that the three women she spent the most time with were not “pursuing a relationship with Jesus or anything.” She said that two of these women were Christian; one was Jewish. Amy said, “But ... it [being a Christian] definitely made some of the relationships easier to develop, because we had not only the fact that we were both going to be teachers, but something else in common too.”

Mary mentioned instances when religion would be referenced in her education classes.

She said:

... I remember one thing we did, it was towards the end of the semester last semester, and we had to make this—it was basically like the first letter of our name, and then we found pictures and stuff to represent who we were and how we grew up and all that stuff, and a lot of the girls put crosses or put something about their faith. I think we were all just really open about it, and no one was afraid to be like, “Hey, I’m a Christian, or hey, I’m Jewish, or whatever.” We just all talked about it.

Mary said that if something in class related to her faith, she “didn’t hold back from relating it.” She had one professor who “openly talked about stuff she did at church” which Mary thought was “cool.” However, Mary later said she did not know the religious beliefs of most of the faculty.

Mary and I talked about the ways her religious beliefs surfaced in her education classes, and she remembered an assigned book that she had found offensive. The author of the book used

profanity, and Mary did not want to read the book for that reason. She said, “I made it known that I didn’t want to read it, because I didn’t agree with it ... she’s ... cussing like crazy on the first page, this is ridiculous. I don’t want to read this.” Mary said she did not remember what her professor did in response to her concerns, but some of her peers agreed with her views, while others “were like, eh, it’s whatever.” Ultimately, Mary did not read all of the assigned sections of the book. Later, I discovered a progressive Christian author wrote the book on writing. I mentioned that to Mary, who was surprised that was the case. Other than the incident described above, Mary did not experience tension in her classes because of her religious beliefs. Even in the case of the book, she acknowledged that her problem with the profanity was “partially” due to her religious beliefs, but also because of her “morals” and the way she “grew up.”

Mary was vocal about her cohort being predominantly Christian, something she also experienced at her elementary school placement. She said:

... we’ve talked about this but, I just found it really, really interesting that 90% of the people I met in the school, faculty-wise, I knew for a fact they were Christian....

I just feel like almost everyone I met, you can just tell, just the way they—I don’t know, just like conversations, and how they would address things, and what we talked about, and some of them would just up and say it, or talking about praying or God or whatever.

So it was very interesting....

Mary described the positive environment this helped create for her. She said, “It was almost uplifting, knowing that I was surrounded by people who had the same beliefs as I did and who were like-minded, I guess. I don’t know if that makes sense, but that was comforting.”

During one of the interviews, I shared that some Christian students did not find teacher education faculty supportive of their religious beliefs. None of the participants in this study

shared those feelings, but I asked Mary what advice she would give to education faculty in regard to the intersection of students' religious faith and teaching. Mary said:

Well it sounds like a lot of them are being judgmental, and I think that's silly.... I mean, just to know that everyone's different ... I've had a bad experience with a Christian. I mean, everybody has had a bad experience with one person or another, whether they're Christian or not, and so just to not stereotype, and not put that view that you have of someone on to somebody else and just assume. And to be considerate, and I don't know...

Mary had wanted more opportunities in her education program to discuss different challenges in the classroom. She included her religious faith in this, but said that she had wanted, in general, a space for "an open, un-judged, honest conversation" with her peers and with a professor or "someone who's been there." Mary found many of the conversations with her peers in her classes to be judgmental, and said, "I wish that we all weren't so quick to snap at each other and judge what each other said, I guess." I asked Mary what these disagreements were about, and she said, "Literally anything." She would have liked to have conversations without judgment about some of the challenges of teaching. In chapter seven, I address Mary's concerns surrounding religious beliefs in the school setting and some of her reasons why religion should be discussed in teacher education.

Sarah

... when I got into the program, and we had those intro classes and were able to introduce ourselves to everybody and bring the items to share ... half the class brought in Bibles and stuff like that.

During my first interview with Sarah, we talked about her involvement and leadership in a ministry organization on the university campus. As a leader, she wanted to be a role model for younger students in the ministry and support them. She said:

... most of the time, it's not even being supportive in their faith, it's being supportive in their life ... we just say, sharing life together is what we do there. Because that's the best way in my opinion now is to show God's love is just to be there for somebody as much as you can and everything else.

Sarah described meeting with younger college students:

I would have one-on-ones with some students, if a younger student, especially in the early childhood program, just so that they could have that mentor kind of image above them saying, it'll be okay, we'll get through it, and share and talk with them about how life's going and how they're experiencing everything. We did one-on-ones all the time and we had different meetings and different small groups that are Bible studies or even fun small groups like trivia and movie nights and stuff.

I wondered if there were many early childhood majors involved in this ministry. She said, "Not too many ... there's a lot of education majors, but early childhood is a smaller number."⁴ Sarah was not sure why this was the case, but went on to say, "There's a lot of people in this major [early childhood] that are very active in their faith in different ministries across the campus." I asked Sarah how she knew about this, and she said:

We talk about it all the time. In all of our classes.... we would have "about me" days right at the beginning and bring in a few items and almost everyone would bring in a Bible it seemed like, and different situations, we would talk about it and stand up and be like, "Oh yeah, I prayed about this"... and then everyone else will start saying the same

⁴ Sarah did not know if education majors were a larger percentage of the ministry than other majors.

thing or something. And especially with ministries on campus ... that is a way to find that out. You just say, "Hey, want to come to ---?" "Oh no. I'm part of ---"--the Baptist ministry or another ministry on campus. And so there's a bunch of different ministries that you would hear about people going to and churches on Sunday. I always saw girls in my cohort that would be at --- Church on Sundays when I started going to that. Just seeing them at different events, and you're like, "Oh cool, neat."

I asked Sarah about her experiences in her classes when others would share about their religious beliefs. She said:

... I remember the first time that one of those things got brought up, I was kind of take aback because in public school, you're not allowed to talk about it at all it feels like, and when you're in the program, they make a point to say you're not supposed to share your beliefs with your students and make it very obvious at school because you don't want to offend other people. And so until I got into the program, I was very uncomfortable with the idea, because I thought that it wasn't allowed. And then when multiple girls would stand up and talk about it, then I started feeling like this is cool. And definitely by the last two semesters, it was completely comfortable in sharing. And I know there were a few students ... or girls in my class that were not of that faith, but I don't think it was uncomfortable, I think it was an open subject. Just understood and accepted.

Sarah talked about how having "more in common" made it "more comfortable to relate to people" in her cohort.

I asked Sarah if religious beliefs were shared in class outside of the icebreaker activities. She said:

... in the education program ... it's like totally discussion based all the time, and so when we would break out into those groups, religion would definitely come up a lot for little issues that we would talk about or projects. I know that a lot of the times when religion came up was just the fact concerning how public teachers are not really supposed to bring up religion in classrooms and how hard that makes some situations for us as Christians, because we want to be able to share what we believe, but you're not really supposed to do that as a public school, government person, you're not allowed really to influence in any way. It makes it really hard. So we would talk about that, and that gave us an outlet for our frustrations and our concerns or anything that we had concerning that. I wouldn't say the majority of our conversations were directed by religion, but it came up on a regular basis.

Sarah said that most of the time religion came up in side conversations, but that there were times when a professor would "present it [religious belief] ... as an issue." She specifically mentioned a professor bringing up holidays in the classroom:

Like Christmas and Easter and stuff ... what things you can have in your classroom, things you can't and how you can get around the concept. You can have Christmas if you teach about Christmas around the world and stuff like that, just how Christmas can be portrayed differently in different countries.

Sarah said her cohort sometimes asked questions in class about "what would be allowed and what wouldn't be" in schools.

During one of the interviews, Sarah shared about a meeting with her university field supervisor. She and two other women from her cohort met with their supervisor, who asked them to share about their experiences as student teachers. Sarah said:

We all said that we had been praying for our classrooms that we didn't even know yet, but we were just praying for them, and that it would be an awesome year, that would be a great experience, and then each one of us went around and shared that. And then each one of us went ahead and shared that our mentor teachers honestly told us that that was the best and quietest class without us prompting them. They just said, "I've never had this great of a class before." And so that was just like—it was just a really cool experience to hear that, that was another prayer that was answered for each of us. That's an example of us talking about it [religious beliefs] with a supervisor.

I asked how the supervisor responded to what the group had shared. Sarah said:

It was more of an uncomfortable thing for her, because I think that it's so engrained in all of the university right now that you're not allowed to talk about religion, and I think that honestly, with the professors that I had in the classes, when things would be brought up, they'd kind of just accept it and move on, just like we have to do with our students in public schools. And so they kind of treated us like exactly what we're technically supposed to treat our students like so when we brought it up, I could tell that my supervisor was slightly uncomfortable with us saying that. And so I dropped off of it and so did the other girl, but the third girl has worked in a Christian camp every summer for the past four years, and she is very comfortable just telling people stories. She's not forcing it on anyone in anyway, but she won't—that's one of her only topics she talks about is her Christianity and her beliefs and what she notices and so she's a really encouraging and inspiring person for me to be around. But I noticed during that meeting that she kept bringing up different things, and she would say like, "and I kept praying about this, and it's been really hard in this sense, so I've been praying about it." And my

supervisor was just kind of like, “Okay, like, move on.” I don't know if that's interesting to you or not.

Sarah found this exchange to be a “bonding experience” for her and her two peers, but felt the discussion made the supervisor uncomfortable. She said the supervisor tried to redirect the conversation and move on to a different subject.

Olivia

... because of being in class, people know what you believe and what you think based on what you've offered to the discussion or to the topic.

Of all the participants, Olivia spoke the least about the religious homogeneity of the cohort. Olivia did mention religious beliefs being discussed in certain classes within her program. She said:

... it really has been in more of the discussion based classes. If it's in a class where we're just kind of learning math, or we're learning science, and we're learning these straightforward ways to teach something, then it hasn't necessarily come up, but in our reading classes or our writing classes where things are more expressive, and it's more what you think and what you believe, we did—in order to learn how to teach those things, we did a lot of it ourselves, and so we would read a lot about something, a specific topic or something or someone else's opinion, and then we would write about it or we would write our opinion on something. And so in that sense, it did come out because everybody was bringing their specific opinions, their specific backgrounds....

Olivia talked about her religious beliefs being expressed in indirect ways in her education classes. She said:

I would state my opinion, but it wouldn't be, "I think this because I'm a Christian" or "I think this because the Bible says." It was just, "I think this," and then because people knew me, they would say, oh well, that might be because of what she already believes. Olivia said her children's literature class and writing class were "very open environments" where she could give her opinion "on anything."

Earlier Olivia had talked about how important it was to reflect upon her background. Olivia said, "...you had to think about where you were coming from, and why you were in the classroom, and what views you were bringing, so as not to push yours too far and trample on someone else's." Like Sarah, Olivia mentioned a class discussion about holidays at schools. She said:

.... we brought up the idea of students in your class, when you have holidays, be considerate. If there's a student that can't celebrate this holiday for reasons, you need to have something set up for them. It doesn't mean you can't do it, it just means you need to respect that all the students believe, and if they tell you, I don't—I can't celebrate this or I don't celebrate this, then you need to have another activity set up for them to do—where they're not uncomfortable, where they're not having to participate. So we talked about that situation. I know one time someone in our cohort brought up the ... it was kind of funny, because it shouldn't have been a debate, and it turned into a debate, but somebody brought up one time about they really wished they could have a Christmas tree in their class. And then so we got into a conversation within our class about whether that was okay or not. And I think we came to the consensus of it depended on how you were setting that up. If it was, oh, this is a Christmas tree, let me tell you the story of Christmas and of Jesus and all of this. But I know they'll have ... the angel tree set up in

the front of the school for around Christmas time ... you'll take the angel off, and it's for ... underprivileged kids, and you'll give ... it tells you what they would like for Christmas and so you'll go out and buy the gifts, like a charity thing. Where you'll go and buy the gift and bring it back, and I'm pretty sure they've had one of those in the front of the school I've seen before. And so I think it depends on how you set that up. If you're like, let me tell you what I believe or if it's like, this is just winter and holidays and trees. Pine trees, winter trees.... And I mean, because that's a hard holiday too to deal with, because it has become so secular as well ... there's people that celebrate the presents and the festivities and the decorations and I'm going to give you a gift because you're my friend and I care about you, and not celebrate the Christian Christmas part of it, and so I think there's a weird line there, and that's what mainly the conversation was about, was where's the line, and what can we do in a classroom, and what can't we. It was interesting.

I asked Olivia about the education instructor's response to the discussion. Olivia said the instructor said that it "gets sticky" and that "if you're going to put this up for Christmas ... then you have these other students in your class that are celebrating this, this, and this. She was like, 'then ... you need to have these things up as well.'" Olivia felt the instructor was also saying, if you are teaching *about* holidays, then "put a Christmas tree in the corner, put a menorah in the window, whatever. And tell the kids what they're about from an informative perspective."

Olivia talked about one day in her student teaching placement when she became especially aware of our conversations about the intersection of teaching and religious beliefs. She was in the elementary school teaching on September 11th, 2012, and the school showed a 9/11 commemorative video. Olivia said:

It was school wide. An e-mail was sent out and asked to show the video in your classroom to your students, and it was just basically having students remember and be able to see what had happened. And it was a song.

Olivia said the song that played throughout the video was Alan Jackson's song, *Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning*. She said:

... when they played it, I kind of ... because I'm a Christian, I had no problem with it, but I was ... sitting there thinking how could they play this school wide, and it be okay? Because of conversations we've had, because it says Jesus in it, it says God in it. It had a picture of a cross at one point, because it says, do you kneel down to pray, what did you do.... And so I was sitting there thinking about it, and I was like, "How do we play this?" And then the more I processed it, the more I came to kind of a conclusion of well, it's not saying this is what you *should* have done, and this is what you *have* to do. It was asking these questions throughout the whole thing, and it was never saying this is the one ... you should have done in this situation.

Olivia said this video caused her to reflect upon her Christian perspective.

Looking Across

The women talked about their religious faith in their classes and elementary school settings, albeit to varying degrees. In general, the women in the study came from a cohort of pre-service teachers who identified in similar ways. Only five of the 35 early childhood students surveyed did not self-identify as a Christian in some way or with a Christian denomination. Of course, even though most identified in that way, there is still much to know. For example, we do not know the influence or salience of the other students' religious beliefs on their lives or teaching. However, this type of religious homogeneity seemed to create comfort for the

participants. I think it is worth noting, that in addition to a common religious identification, there were other commonalities. It was Sarah who expressed her surprise about the overall lack of diversity in the program, and that the majority of the education students in her cohort were White, middle to upper class, women. Of course, some diversity existed. But as a whole, the commonalities among the group seemed pronounced.

Their common belief in Christianity often provided encouragement and support to the women. This included a context where they could share and discuss concerns, even if there were differences within the discussions. Lastly, I was struck by the fact that all the participants were leaders in their Christian communities, which included heavy involvement in different campus ministries at the university.

Support and Community

Sharing their Christian religious beliefs with others in their cohort seemed to lead to a sense of comfort and community for the participants. Amy talked about how she and other Christian women in the cohort encouraged each other, and her experience carpooling with another Christian woman to her teaching placement was a daily source of support for her.

Mary has mixed feelings about her cohort, but still found benefits to having Christianity in common. During one interview she said:

... so a lot of the girls got annoyed by me because I'd always ask questions when they didn't feel like asking questions, or I'd say something that they thought didn't need to be said. Or something like that, I don't know. I didn't get along with some of them, but I mean definitely, the girls that ... you could tell which ones of us had the same faith. It was just easy to see that, and so, I don't know, I guess all going for the same goal....
I mean I guess it just made it easy to relate to some of them ...

Despite feelings of ambivalence with the group as a whole, Mary talked about how having their Christian faith in common sometimes made it easier for her to relate to her peers. She also said being “surrounded by people who had the same beliefs” in her school placement was “comforting.”

Sarah mentioned that she had a difficult time making close friends in the cohort, because she already had a “core set of friends.” Despite this making it “harder to connect” with some of the women in her classes, she said:

... but at the same time, like I mentioned last time, that we would bring in things about us and people would come in with Bibles, and ... when someone would say, “Oh yeah, I heard a sermon at --- Church,” when they would give an example in class and a bunch of other girls would stand up and be like, “Oh yeah. I go to --- Church.” And I would go there, and I would see some of them there. Those little touch bases where we realize that that was a common thing between us made me definitely ... it made me feel more comfortable talking to them.... but I guess I would say that it definitely made it easier to connect with them knowing that they felt the calling too, and they were in the same program as me, so having more in common made it more comfortable to relate to people in my cohort, definitely.

Olivia did not talk about the support of her peers in the same way, but she did observe Christian values at her school placement. This caused her to reflect upon Christian viewpoints present in schooling.

Concerns or Dilemmas

During one of the interviews, Sarah expressed some of the challenges of teaching in a public school setting related to her religious understandings as a Christian. She talked about conversations that took place with the women in her cohort. She said:

Yeah, I would say that the majority feels it's completely ridiculous that we're not allowed to have our religion influence our teaching outwardly. Obviously we all want—not obviously, but we would talk about how inwardly, we do not let that hinder us because we'll show as much love as we want to and do whatever we can that is not outwardly Christian—labeled as a Christian thing, but yeah, definitely—I don't think I ever heard anyone speak against how ridiculous it is to put a limit on what we can do, because of the whole religion—the right to have whatever religion you want. It's frustrating to know that other religions are allowed to be shared, but that because Christian is such a big religion, that people feel that the majority is picking on the minority and so that's just—it's just frustrating for us a lot.

Sarah described the frustration she felt and how this issue was discussed with her peers:

Well the majority of the things—because this discussion would come up about all different topics, just the whole—I don't know even know what standard it is anymore, but a year or so ago, when the school—I think it was California, they were going to take God out of the Pledge of Allegiance, and little things like that where they're removing that, and now they're not allowed to say the moment of silence. You can pray, you can't say that, you just say take a moment of silence, and then leave it at that and little minor things like that are just frustrating for us. Because honestly, that could—prayer can be for any religion, but it's just frustrating that they wouldn't even be allowed to speak about religion at

school anymore, that's what it's come to. And like being able to have a Christmas party. You have to call it a holiday party, or for Easter, you have to call it a Spring party, and it's just really frustrating because those holidays are of such importance and even though we're not trying to push it on other people, we feel that it's not fair to completely ignore it and pretend that it's not there and even announce it or anything. It's just—those kinds of things are very frustrating, I think. I would say that other majority would be when students bring up stuff in class ... [elementary] students have brought up God or Jesus, and this is just in the past two weeks, things that kids say because that's how they were raised, and they don't know that you're not supposed to talk about it at school. Because when you're raised like that, you think that everybody feels that way. That's how I felt when I went to school, and so kids will bring up God or Jesus and for September 11th the other day, we showed a video and the video had a picture of Jesus. It was the Star Spangled Banner, America the Beautiful or one of those songs, and it said something about God in it, so they show a picture of God, and it goes on through the PowerPoint and a little boy kept saying, "It's God. I know Him. It's God." And you're just not really allowed to address it, and it's just so frustrating to not be able to be like, "Yeah, that is God." Because that's what, as a Christian, you're supposed to encourage—if they want to know about it, you're supposed to encourage ...

Sarah perceived others in her cohort as having similar concerns and frustrations.

Olivia's description of the cohort's conversation on holidays in the schools seemed to echo this understanding as well. Even though members of the education cohort had different thoughts about having a Christmas tree in the classroom, there seemed to be a commonality of a concern, or perhaps a desire, to have that option. Additionally, Olivia and Sarah both shared

about a 9/11 commemorative video in their different school placements that referenced Christianity. In other words, concerns about how to address issues of religion that came up in schooling recurred in the interviews.

Church Involvement and Ministry

Lastly, the participants' shared a commitment to different Christian churches and ministry organizations, and I was struck by the extent of their involvement. Amy, Sarah, and Olivia seemed to be more currently involved than Mary, at least with campus-based ministries. However, Christian ministry was still a part of Mary's life, partially because of the extent of her family's involvement.

Amy. Amy described her participation in several different faith-based organizations. She helped with her local church's youth program teaching elementary-aged children in a small group on Sunday mornings. She had been a volunteer in the elementary program for two years, but was currently taking a break and only working with the "large group a couple of times a month." She also attended a weekly small group of college women at the same church.

Amy was also involved with a university campus ministry, where she had served as a small group leader the prior year. She was still involved in the leadership of this ministry and described regularly attending the Wednesday night service:

... on Wednesday nights, there's a big --- service and before that, they have the leaders meet for an hour and really just pray over the whole service. It's really cool, it's just like this community communal prayer.... so just an hour of just praying.... And then the service is after that, and it's just like worship, the message, and more worship afterwards.

Leadership in this organization included being “discipled by somebody who is ... older,” including regular meetings with this mentor. In addition to this ministry organization, Amy was involved in a smaller faith-based college community, which met in someone’s house and was more focused on worship.

Mary. As mentioned earlier, Mary’s family was very involved in Christian ministry. Her grandparents had their own ministry organization and spoke at conferences and churches. Her little brother wanted to become a pastor, and her father was a leader in the church the family attended together. Mary still regularly drove an hour to attend church with her family, but had yet to find a church where she was currently living.

Mary had previously been involved in a campus ministry on campus. She had participated in a weekly small group the prior year. Recently she had attended a ski retreat with a different campus ministry, and said she had also been involved in a sorority Bible study, but said, “it wasn’t anything major.”

Sarah. Sarah also spoke of her involvement in different ministries. She had been involved for the past three years in a campus ministry organization that met on Thursday nights. Sarah went on retreats with the group four times a year. She had been a leader in the group for the past two years, but was not currently a leader since she was about to graduate. In the beginning, her duties with the ministry included cleaning and setting up for the weekly meeting, helping with parking, and writing nametags. Then her responsibility became working with members of the group to make visitors feel welcome in the meeting. Sarah described the campus ministry as:

... just a really loving place and honestly, we have people that come that aren’t Christian, aren’t interested in being Christian, but they come because they know that they’re going

to be loved, and be remembered, and have people that care about them ... we had somebody who is Muslim come back all the time last year who would just come hang out and do the worship service and sit through all of that, and that's what we're all about at--- is making people feel comfortable and letting them know that they're loved. We have a free lunch on campus on Mondays at --- Hall and tons of people come to that, they're just coming for the free food, but when they get there, we tell them that we love them, and we have a little short clip that's an encouragement message, and it's just ... to let people know that they're loved, even though we don't know who they are, and we don't care where they come from or anything. We just want to them to know that--because I think that that is how my faith has changed, is that's what my belief is now, is just to be there for everybody. I think that's another reason I want to be a public school teacher, instead of a private school teacher, because that way, I have more of an outreach to show not just a specific crowd of people that I love them, but to show everybody that they can be loved no matter who they are.

Sarah said the ministry wants people to know they are loved:

... because ... a lot of people have issues with Christians, because they worry that Christians are hypocrites ... And so I think that --- really makes a good point of saying, "Hey, we're definitely not perfect people, but we're working together to try to follow God's word, and we would love for you to hang out with us, because you're just the same," kind of thing--loving people.

Olivia. Olivia regularly attended a local church, but was also very involved in a campus ministry organization. The ministry held a worship service on Tuesday nights, and after the service, the members met in small groups. Olivia began attending during her Freshman year:

I just felt comfortable.... it was easy to jump right in and get involved, and I did, and I've been there going on four and a half years by the time I graduate. I was on leadership two of the years, sophomore and junior year. And then last year, I wasn't on leadership but I was in the worship band so I participated in that.

Olivia said leadership took different forms in the ministry—from being a small group leader to various outreach opportunities. She was the “kid’s club coordinator” during her sophomore year and was in charge of a weekly program for children at a local housing complex. Olivia said members of the ministry would create “an after school program and go and hang out with the kids, and do a craft and a Bible story and play outside ...” The following year she was the “outreach coordinator,” this position included oversight of the homeless ministry, kid’s club ministry, and campus outreach.

Olivia had been on many mission trips including: rebuilding a home after Hurricane Katrina; conducting an inner city day camp in Jacksonville, Florida; working in a soup kitchen in Dallas, Texas; talking to people in New York City about diverse religious beliefs and “the best place” to “put a church;” conducting day camps for inner city children in Savannah, Georgia; and working with homeless ministries in San Francisco. Olivia explained that she went on a mission trip every Spring Break while in college, and frequently went on mission trips in the summer as well.

As shown above, the women in the study were very involved in their faith-based communities. This context, in addition to the context of their education cohort and elementary school placements, helped to create places of support in regard to their religious beliefs and understandings. Yet, as I will discuss later in this chapter, there seemed to be an absence of a

place to thoughtfully discuss religious understandings in the formal context of their teacher education courses.

Connections to the Literature

A Christian Context

The participants' stories reveal contexts where their Christian beliefs were prominent and accepted, and at times, encouraged. Perhaps this is not surprising since current religious statistics reflect Christianity's prevalence in American culture. According to the Pew Research Center, 79.5% of the United States population identified as Christian in a 2010 survey (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2011). Even though the religious landscape in America is shifting, diverse, and fluid (Pew Forum, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008), eight-in-ten adults report "belonging to various forms of Christianity" (p. 10). Granted, this statistic does not address whether this identification is cultural, doctrinal, or a combination—still it reveals the influence of Christianity within the culture at large.

This religious predominance is reflected in Christianity's history of influence in America's public schools. Burke and Segall (2011) highlight the intersection of religion and schooling and state:

... it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to separate religion from schooling. After all, European schools, which have served as the forbearers of American education, originated, during the Middle Ages, within and by the church and, as divinity (divine?) schools, were designed for the purpose of studying the teachings of religion. While such a vision, enhanced in the US by early European-American settlers' perceptions of the role of education as serving primarily religious purposes, has been largely abandoned in modern America, traces of its legacy may be harder to abandon, especially in a nation

where a majority of citizens still declare themselves Christian, if not through a religious identification then as a cultural one. (p. 632)

In the mid-19th century, common schools developed and spread in the United States, but there was not a rigid separation of “common” and “religious” (Burke & Segall, 2011, p. 637). Burke and Segall claim, “The fact is not only that such a separation was inconceivable then but Protestants, the largest ‘common’ religious affiliation at the time, could not imagine a ‘common’ that was not inherently Protestant in nature” (p. 637). According to McClellan (1992):

As Americans of the nineteenth century grappled with the problem of moral education, they made a fateful decision about schools. Instead of following the past of most European countries and building on a long tradition of state support for religious education, they undertook the construction of a vast new system of nonsectarian public schooling. The aim was not to forbid religion in the classroom, but rather to teach a nonsectarian Christianity at public expense, leaving to other institutions the responsibility for instruction in the fine points of theological doctrine. (p. 35).

Waves of immigrants, the first US Catholic school, and “increasing religious freedoms and ‘a genial pattern of democratic “secular” thought associated with the Enlightenment’ (Marty 2000: 37)” led to public schools moving “from a Christian denominational spirit to the new doctrine of late 19th century Americanism” (Burke & Segall, 2011, p. 637). However, Burke and Segall argue “religion continued to play a role in education regardless of decades of attempts to secularize and ‘modernize’ schools” which “is best evidenced by the need for a series of court decisions regarding the relationship between religion and schooling in the US” (pp. 637-638). Even though courts interpret and establish the legalities of religious expression and endorsement

within schools, according to Burke and Segall, courts “cannot, however, regulate, culture” and “cannot take religiosity out of people or de-couple culture from its religious roots” (p. 638).

Taken for Granted?

Christianity’s influence and presence in American education is so familiar that it may seem natural. Burke and Segall (2011) argue the neglect of religion in educational literature has allowed religion to remain what Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) would call “this ‘nothingness, this taken for granted entity’ yet, at the same time, assuming a shadow that becomes part of a ‘transcendental consciousness’ (p. 30)” (p. 633). Perhaps “Jesus and rainbows” are so much a part of the fabric of schools and teaching that when someone points it out, like the student did with Mary, it is understandable that her reaction would be, “What the heck?... Why is that a bad thing?” After all, Christianity could very well be that “taken for granted entity” that remains ever present, and a different point of view may seem strange, off-putting, or even discriminatory for some.

Burke and Segall (2011) claim the examination of Christianity’s influence in education would not only be useful for those who do not identify as Christians, but also for those who do. They state:

... we are not suggesting that religion in schools is problematic in itself but that leaving its manifestations largely unexplored just might be. For the discourses and daily practices of schools are perhaps as, if not more, educative, even if in different ways, than explicit religious instruction. Put differently, this is not an argument about whether we should teach (about) religion in schools; it is a suggestion that we already do and would thus be best served to begin acknowledging how and to what extent. (p. 652)

I mention the influence of Christianity in American schooling to highlight the contexts and history the participants are stepping into. In the final chapter, I discuss how Christian women are remarkably well suited for the discourses found within American primary education. My intent here is to show that the religious homogeneity found in their cohort does not stop there, but is often reinforced in schools and within the greater culture. Even though religious diversity is an integral part of the United States, the history of Christianity in schooling and the lasting predominance of Christian beliefs in American culture may serve to lessen the exigency of discussing religion. As mentioned by James (In Press), the assumption might be, “We’re all Christians here.” This may be part of the reason why some education students find limitations regarding their faith in the classroom so perplexing. For example, Sarah articulated her frustration in having “a moment of silence” instead of “prayer” or having to call a school’s [Easter] party a “Spring party.” Perhaps the perception is that the majority of students and parents are Christian. These contexts and histories help understand why religious homogeneity matters—not just in this teacher education contexts, but in the history of schooling and within the greater American culture.

For the participants, the prevalence and influence of their Christian faith is clear, and even though there were instances of dialogue surrounding religion in their teacher education courses, the intent behind these discussions is unclear. Perhaps understanding Christianity’s influence in schooling and in the culture can illuminate how easy it is for Christian teachers to assume and interpret norms within classrooms. Religious homogeneity should be discussed and deconstructed within the greater American culture, within American schooling, and then within early childhood education. All these contexts influence the presence of Jesus and rainbows.

Discussion

Possible Consequences

In some ways, the religious homogeneity of the participants' cohort is not surprising, for the reasons mentioned above, and also because many college students proceed through their programs of study surrounded by peers who identify in similar ways (Bécares & Turner, 2004; Kimball et al., 2009). Kimball et al. (2009) found college students recognize, at least to some degree, the different worldviews associated with majors and may self-sort accordingly. For example, Bohlmeier, Burke, and Helrnstadter (as cited in Bécares & Turner, 2004, p. 468) claim education majors are more emotionally empathetic than business majors. Other research indicates, "highly religious people seem to prefer Education majors" (Kimball et al., 2009, p. 22).

On one hand, such a context may allow students to more readily share experiences with peers; they may feel a sense of common purpose and commitment to the field. Mary described her teacher education classes as a place where fellow students were open about their religious faith and "no one was afraid to be like hey, I'm a Christian, or hey, I'm Jewish or whatever." Amy mentioned the benefit of reading the Bible and praying with another Christian student teacher during their commute to their field placement. Sarah said "having more in common" made it more comfortable for her to relate to students in her cohort. Research (Hyers & Hyers, 2008; James, 2010; Marsden, 1996; Swain, 2005) indicates some Christians feel judged or like outsiders in some college settings, and as I will describe in the final chapter, higher education and religious beliefs are not always treated as compatible. The fact that the women in this study felt free to share their religious beliefs within their education cohort is positive.

On the other hand, a lack of religious diversity may silence peers who do not share the same views, and help create limited opportunity to hear divergent religious views in education classes. Even though I did not interview non-Christians in this cohort, we can infer from the “Jesus and rainbow” comment that some students may find such religious homogeneity problematic. There is also the issue of Christian privilege. Blumenfeld and Jaekel (2012) claim:

What many (most likely the majority) within our schools and the larger society consider as “normal” and appropriate, upon critical reflection are perceived by many as (re)enforcements of mainline Christian standards and what is referred to as “Christian privilege,” though presented in presumably secularized forms, and as such, are reminders that the United States is, indeed, not the inclusive and welcoming land of freedom, justice, and equality that it often purports to be (see e.g., Ferber, 2012). For people from ethnic and religious transitions other than mainline Christian, this can have very serious implications on their sense of self and on their identity development, for they may begin to view themselves through the lens of the dominant group. (p. 130)

It would be worth investigating the experiences of non-Christian students within the participants’ cohort to understand how this context influenced their learning and sense of community and self. Did non-Christian students in their cohort feel othered? Did they feel silenced, misunderstood, or pressured to conform? Additionally, if like-minded peers surround college students, one concern is that they adequately consider divergent viewpoints, especially in the case of pre-service teachers who go on to teach diverse student populations. It is unclear to what extent divergent religious viewpoints were discussed within this teacher education context.

The women’s stories reveal that religious views were sometimes discussed in the presence of a professor, but most talk about religion seemed to occur in side conversations with

peers. The lack of guided discussion is a problem. If for example, many pre-service teachers feel frustrated by not having a Christmas tree in a public school, this needs to be discussed. If the assumption is, “We’re all Christian here,” this needs to be discussed. First, it assumes that the religious beliefs (or non-beliefs) of families and students are obvious and public. Secondly, *even if* all in the classroom are Christian, it assumes Christians endorse and subscribe to the same beliefs. For example, even in private Christian schools, families have disagreements regarding the appropriateness of celebrations and rituals. Finally, it assumes a certain view regarding the role of religion in the public sphere—which ironically may conflict with the basic tenets undergirding American democracy.

Balancing Concerns

In this section, I discuss some of the legalities regarding religion and schooling. Religious homogeneity may result in a lack of opportunity to listen to, or understand, how a non-Christian may experience American schooling. Additionally, the participants articulated the need to better understand laws pertaining to religious belief in public schools. American democracy includes balancing the rights of the individual with the rights of the populace, including of course, freedom of religion. There were moments when the participants revealed this tension—in their stories of the import of their faith and limitations placed upon them in the public sphere, as well as simply not knowing how to navigate issues of faith in a public arena. They knew and had some understanding of this balance, but did not seem to experience organized discussions addressing these issues. The homogeneity may contribute to the lack of discussion, as stated earlier. There may not have been a space for those with a non-Christian perspective to voice their beliefs. The Jewish student, Kerri, seemed to share in the carpool setting about her experiences as a non-Christian in school, but again, that was in a private setting.

Navigating religious beliefs in public and diverse communities is an ongoing issue. Schooling in the United States remains squarely situated within this struggle, as reflected in the continuous debate regarding how to navigate issues of religious freedom and expression within public schools. According to Darden (2012):

Sixteen words from the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution are the guide:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” That phrase has been interpreted to represent an intentional design by the nation’s founders to ensure that religion is a matter of personal conscience.

Therefore, school districts may not use their power to unfairly persuade, and citizens hold the right to freely express beliefs or to reject religion entirely.... If only it were that simple. (p. 68)

Thomas Jefferson introduced the term “separation of church and state,” and even though that phrase is not used in the First Amendment, “many citizens as well as judges have accepted Jefferson’s metaphor as the law of the land” (McCarthy, 1983, p. 11). However, making such a clear distinction is no easy task, and “the Supreme Court has recognized on several occasions that total separation between church and state ‘is not possible in an absolute sense’” (p. 11).

Darden states, “A flurry of court decisions has only deepened the fog surrounding battles over religion in public schools” (p. 68), and according to McCarthy (2009), “Religion has been one of the most contentious issues in public schools, and there are no signs that the disputes will disappear” (p. 714). According to Kunzman (2006):

Evidence suggests that the bulk of citizen complaints to local school boards involves religious issues as well. These controversies are not likely to subside, either, given our increasingly ethical diversity. “At the dawn of the new millennium,” historian James

Fraser observes, “the peoples of the United States are more secular, especially in their public culture, more religious, in many different private forms, and more diverse than ever before in the nation’s history.” (p. 13)

Teachers (and in this case pre-service teachers) may experience this tension of the intersection of their private religious beliefs within the public sphere. Sarah felt her Christian religious beliefs were being unfairly limited in public schools. She said:

... it’s more just concerning the fairness of being able to learn about religions in school, I think, because I think that it’s important—it’s not fair to just completely not teach—and I would be completely fine explaining other religions too to my students ... I think that everybody is so fearful of lawsuits now ... I think another huge frustration is with Jehovah’s Witness students because ... if you have that student in your class, you can’t have any celebration of any kind and that’s hindering all the other students, so that’s something else we talk about a lot. They’re allowed to have their faith be completely involved in the school day so if that classroom wants to celebrate something, nobody gets to celebrate it just because of one student, because his religion believes that way. So as—why can’t Christians or Muslims or any of those people be able to have that affect everybody else. Does that make sense? It’s just that balance issue. It makes sense, but at the same time, it’s just—I don’t know, a Catch 22 or something.

Some of Sarah’s concerns echo the beliefs of Christian conservatives in the 1980s who “mimicking multiculturalists on the left ... asked only that their distinct heritage and beliefs receive ‘respect’ and ‘equal time’ in the curriculum” (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 215).

Space to Talk

These issues of religious understandings and religious freedom in schooling continue. The religious homogeneity of the participants' cohort seemed to help discussion with some peers, yet, the women reported limited opportunity to critically think about or discuss the intersection of their religious understandings and teaching within the formal context of their education classes. Furthermore, they seemed to benefit from speaking about their Christian beliefs during the interviews. When asked about the interview process, Amy stated it helped her understand and reflect upon her beliefs. Mary also found the experience "revealing." Sarah said she was "able to more finely develop" her thoughts about how religion and school "intertwine," and Olivia found it caused her to reflect and think, "Oh, I didn't think about that."

Having this space to talk and reflect seemed to generate questions and at times, new understandings. As mentioned earlier, Sarah felt frustrated by an elementary student who was a Jehovah's Witness because of the religion's views on celebrations. Sarah was struggling with the concepts of justice and difference in the classroom community, and yet, even as she spoke about these feelings, she acknowledged it was a complicated issue.

Sarah was committed to making students feel special, which for her meant celebrating with students in the classroom, especially on their birthdays. She explained her feelings regarding this type of activity being limited or eliminated from her future classrooms:

... I don't feel like I can be the joyous—because celebration is a really big thing for me because I get so excited about everything. And I would want to have—not even religious celebrations, not holidays, but just little things, like kids' birthdays, I really think that you can show love by making them feel special on their special day ...

For her, the religious beliefs of one student could unfairly hinder her from loving her students in

this celebratory way. However, weeks after the interview mentioned above, she shared an insight that had altered her perspective. Sarah had perceived the student's religion as a religious "other," but she came to realize this was a simplistic view stating:

I was thinking that a lot of religions are against Christianity but at the same time, it's Christianity just as much as any other religion. I don't know, it shocked me a little bit that I hadn't realized that before because it's just that whole—I think this way so all Christians think this way.... I was just letting Christianity not get the flak for it in my mind. I was defending my own—even though my own religion is one of the pieces of what frustrates me I guess, but it's not religion. It's what some people make their religion, if that makes sense.

Sarah further explained she came to understand that the student self-identified as a Christian, something she had not considered. Prompted by our talks, Sarah's evolution of thought provides a window into the import of dialogue around religious difference within teacher education.

Laws and Rules

Beyond reflection, most of the participants expressed uncertainty towards the more pragmatic (and legal) classroom concerns when it came to issues of religious belief. Mary talked about not really understanding the boundary between her personal religious views and what is appropriate in a public school. As a result, she said she pushed religious thoughts "away," saying she did not want to "get in trouble." Mary said, "I don't want to risk anything, so I stay far away from the boundary so that I don't cross it." She wanted to better understand "the rules" in public schools like:

What can we say, what can't we say, what are responses that we can say when some of our students bring up God or that they don't celebrate this, or that they don't do that or whatever. Just what we can and can't say or examples.... just more guidance in it.

Mary said if a student asked her about her faith, she would have "no clue" regarding how to respond. Sarah also mentioned not sufficiently understanding what is allowed in a public school setting:

... it's such a taboo subject that they [faculty] won't even really address it and I feel like that they should at least address that idea instead of—the only way they'll bring it up is just to say, if you're not sure, don't do it ... And I think that that's very unrealistic because things like that come up almost every week, especially in the South with such a strong Christian population. Kids will constantly bring up Jesus and God and they can relate it to almost any subject.... I think the College of Ed should prepare ... a little more for that.

Sarah said it would have been helpful for education professors to talk about how to "handle" personal religious beliefs in the classroom, because that was her "biggest tension"—"not knowing" what was appropriate to share. However, Sarah wondered how professors could do this, "because some people don't want to share their culture in the classroom." Still, she felt it was needed and said she only had professors who would say, "If you're worried about it, don't bring it up [your personal religious beliefs] at all ... they brush past it ..." Sarah continued:

Yeah, I feel very unsure about ... the legality of anything just because of that age [elementary students]. But for professors that are teaching education students, I don't want to make it seem like I haven't had a good experience with that, because most classes did, on the first few days of class, let you bring in something to share about your life and

so that's when I found out about the groups in my class ... But I don't know, it's not so much I guess the College of Ed's fault as it is just the community of students there probably. It would have been nice to have groups within that, little clubs you could go to or coffee shop ... I don't know. I guess it's more the connections that could have been made.... Just the main thing with me and the College of Ed and the religion is just that whole not feeling comfortable talking about it too much, because of not knowing what is allowed and what is not allowed ...

Olivia also mentioned not knowing what she could talk about in terms of her religious beliefs in a public school, and said, "We never sat down and looked at here's what the actual laws are." She also shared, "Because it's so much a part of me [Christianity], and because I don't really understand what's really allowed and what's really not, where does that put me and what am I allowed to talk about?"

It is not surprising that most of the participants wanted more information about the legalities pertaining to schools and religious belief. There seems to be ongoing confusion about what is allowed and not allowed, and debate around who is benefitted and who is marginalized. Misinformation and lack of discussion are both problems. Yet, there are resources for teachers that could help these mis/understandings. The First Amendment Center publishes *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* that answers common questions about the legalities of religion and schools. Books, such as *Religion in the Classroom: Dilemmas for Democratic Education* by James (In Press), can help teacher educators generate discussion about religion in teacher education classrooms. Even though debates and legislation are ongoing, resources exist to help teachers understand current laws and court rulings, but the participants in this study did not seem to know about such resources.

Summary

There is not enough research to conclude whether this religious homogeneity is common within early childhood education programs across the country. Geography may indeed be a factor, but again, the research does not exist yet. It is understandable that deeply devout teachers would want their faith to be accepted across contexts—whether it be a teacher education course or within the context of a public school. However, the other side of that coin is acknowledging, considering, and creating environments for students and families who do not subscribe to Christian beliefs or ideals—and making sure their deeply felt beliefs (or non-beliefs) are respected as well. A religious student (of any religious tradition), or a non-religious student, or an atheist student, should not feel othered in a public school classroom—for legal and ethical reasons.

Some argue for more freedom *of* religion in schools, while others argue for more freedom *from* religion in schools, and different state laws and interpretations muddy the water even more (Boston, 2014). As the states battle over what the separation of church and state *really* means, so do our teachers. At the very least, teacher educators can create a space to discuss what these contexts and laws do *to* and *for* teachers and students, regardless of religious affiliation or non/belief.

The context of “Jesus and rainbows” may be reinforced by American culture, the history of Christianity in schools, and of course in this case, the education cohort. The influence of this homogeneity means more discussion is needed—including the positive and negative implications of such contexts, and the import, debates, and legalities of the separation of church and state. The participants had a cursory understanding about religious beliefs in the public sphere. Most of them wanted more information and understanding. Teacher educators need to create a space for these discussions to occur.

CHAPTER 7

UNPACKING RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS IN TEACHING

This is a study of how the religious understandings of four pre-service teachers influenced their views on *teaching as a calling*, their education courses, and their relationships and roles in the classroom. I began by examining the term “calling” and how the participants linked calling to innate ability, choice, and purpose. I argued that calling may be another inherited discourse of teaching, and that pre-service teachers may feel that a sense of calling is a requirement/expectation of the profession. Yet, little dialogue seems to exist surrounding what calling really means. I then discussed how calling was linked to the participants’ views on relationships and how the relational aspect of teaching was highly valued and approached by the participants with commitment and earnestness. Finally, I turned the conversation to the religious homogeneity of the participants’ cohort and also examined the influence of Christianity within American schooling. These contexts help to understand how and why religious understandings are an important component to teacher education and to schooling in general. The women’s stories demonstrate how religion plays a complicated and important role in the process of learning to teach.

Inherited Discourses

In this study, a common theme evolved in the midst of the stories: the lasting presence of the inherited discourses of education. Whether it was the word “calling” or the descriptions of innate ability, sacrifice, and accountability, I was surprised by the commonalities between much of the gendered discourse of the Common School Era and the discourse being used in primary

education today. It was not my original intent to draw from feminist scholars in education, but it was difficult to ignore gender in this study. In the same manner, I did not intend to engage in discourse analysis. However, the work of James Gee became useful to examine the import of the language and its power in these contexts.

Which Came First?

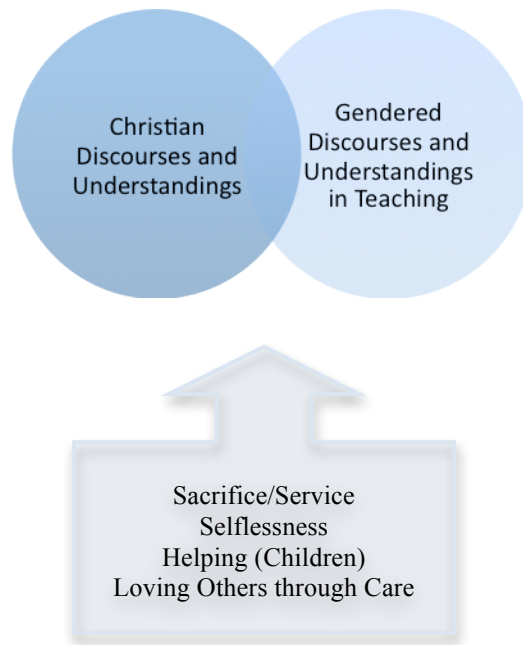
According to Gee (1999):

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to *fit* the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write *creates* that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place. This is rather like the “chicken and egg” question: Which comes first? The situation we’re in (e.g. a committee meeting)? Or the language we use (our committee ways of talking and interacting)? After all, if we did not speak and act in certain ways, committees could not exist; but then, if institutions, committees, and committee meetings didn’t already exist, speaking and acting this way would be nonsense. The answer here is that this magical property is real and language and institutions “boot strap” each other into existence in a reciprocal process through time. (p. 11)

I often thought of this relationship between the construction and perpetuation of discourses during the participants’ descriptions of teaching. I did not know which came first, or which was more powerful—the religious discourses of Christianity or the gendered discourses found in primary education. But clearly the overlap between the two helped me understand why some Christian women are drawn to early childhood education.

Figure 4

Overlapping Discourses



Gee (1999) talks about the difference between “Discourses” with a capital D and “discourses” with a little “d.” He states, “the word ‘discourse,’ with a little ‘d,’” is “language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)” (p. 17). However, “‘Big D’ Discourses are always language *plus* ‘other stuff’” (p. 17). Gee claims:

The key to Discourses is “recognition.” If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer).... The Discourses we enact existed before each of us came on the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene.

Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history. (p. 18)

Gee's description of "a particular type of who (identity) engaged in particular type of what (activity)" makes me think of a particular type of woman engaged in the act of teaching. Again, if primary education frames teaching as a moral and sacrificial activity, it is not surprising Christian women are drawn to the field. The Discourse of primary education and the Discourse of Christianity may funnel certain women into the field.

Another way Gee (1996) refers to Discourse is as "a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize" (p. 127). I argue that Christian, middle-class, women often have an identity kit that suitably dresses them for the work of elementary teachers.

Helping education students understand how language, history, and context has shaped the field of primary education could begin with conversations surrounding views on teaching and the taken for granted roles of a teacher. These discussions could include how ideals often valued within Christian faith communities are similar to values replicated in primary education. Of course another facet of this dialogue is the framing of teaching as a calling. Christian universities may help students differentiate between primary and secondary callings, as students understand this language within religious doctrine. Public universities do not address religious callings in this way, and within the context of teacher education, many instructors may not be aware of these religious distinctions. However, if many (or most) education students use such language and are interpreting meaning through the lens of religious understandings, it may be helpful to understand the origin of this discourse or examine different meanings. I view the use

of “calling” as a combination of Christian teaching and language intermixed with gendered discourses common to primary education. I am not claiming that men do not reference teaching as a calling. However, I do believe this language is more pronounced in primary education, a field dominated by women.

Implications

In chapter one, I discussed my goals for this study and my primary research question: *How do religious student teachers define and think about teaching as a calling, and how do their religious meanings and perspectives influence their experiences in the context of their work at a public university?* In this section, I discuss how my study addressed my original inquiry through the use of the women’s stories.

Teaching as a Calling

As outlined in chapter four, the participants’ definitions of calling served to complicate the meaning of the word and provide understanding regarding what pre-service teachers mean when they refer to teaching in this way. For some, like Amy, calling was not that useful of a term in regard to her teaching. She viewed calling as direction from God—that changed and was informed by her relationship with Him. All the women linked calling to innate gifting and pursued an occupation that incorporated those gifts. Of course, Sarah defined calling in the most precise way—as she felt specifically called to teach elementary students. However, like the others, this calling was a reflection of her gifting. Their stories revealed the complexities of calling and caused me to question the construct of framing teaching as a calling.

I could certainly explore “calling” more by delving into theological texts and how different religious and spiritual scholars use and define the term. Within Christian literature there are books on calling: from how to discern your personal calling to how to live out your

calling. And as mentioned, there are distinctions made between Christian primary and secondary callings. But the goal of my study was not to better understanding calling according to theologians, but to understand calling according to pre-service teachers. In other words, as a teacher educator, I wanted to have greater insight into how education students think about and approach teaching. I wanted to know what calling meant to *them*. By using the narrative, by allowing these women to talk in detail about calling and teaching, we have more insight to the definitions and understandings behind this term. A quantitative study could not address these issues of understandings to the same degree. The narrative provided a way to understand each woman's perspective and the nuances and complexities of meaning.

The Influence of Religious Understandings

The second part of my primary research question—*how do their religious meanings and perspectives influence their experiences in the context of their work at a public university*—was answered in their stories about how their religious understandings influenced their everyday lives—including their thoughts on teaching and experiences within their teacher education courses. Their religious understandings (which influenced their views on calling) could be seen in the reasons why they wanted to teach, and their views on relationships in teacher education and in their student teaching placements. Also, because of the religious homogeneity of their cohort, the focus on being enrolled at “a public university” became less of an issue than assumed. It was Sarah who expressed her surprise at being able to freely talk about her Christian faith in the introductory activities of her courses. She had previously thought this was something not “allowed,” but after several semesters where “multiple girls would stand up and talk about it [their faith],” Sarah felt more comfortable sharing about her Christian faith at a public university.

I do not equate this public university context to a Christian college context, but cannot ignore how the religious homogeneity allowed for the women to talk about their faith more openly.

So What?

According to Milligan (2002):

The fact is many, if not most, students and teachers are influenced to one degree or another by religious faith. And religion has had and continues to have a profound influence on history, art, music, politics, and other aspects of culture. It is arguably one of the most profound influences on human experience. One might argue, therefore, that any understandings of these topics that ignores the influence of religious beliefs is partial at best, that any attempt to understand ourselves which brackets out the significance of faith misses one of the most powerful elements of human experience. That is not to say, however, that individuals, particularly teachers should be permitted to use their positions of authority to impose their beliefs on others. It means, rather, in a democratic society, that we must find ways to recognize and honor the place of diverse religious beliefs in human experience and history while prohibiting religious indoctrination in state institutions. But ignoring religion gets us no closer to this goal than embracing it. (p. viii)

In chapter two, I argued that identity matters in teacher education and that teachers cannot separate self from practice (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Gee (2000) defines identity as being recognized as a “certain ‘kind of person’ in a given context” (p. 99), and Charon (2007) states identity is “the name we call ourselves” (p. 86). This naming helps us understand the world. Clearly, the identity of being a Christian was central to the women in this study, and their naming of *being a Christian* influenced how they acted across contexts. They

wanted to be seen as a certain type of person. For example, Amy said her relationship with the Lord “poured out into the whole rest of” her life, “including teaching.” Mary talked about being an example to students through her “love for them” and by “showing who Christ is through” her. She hoped others would notice “something different” in her. Sarah wanted to be a “light to others” and said her faith influenced her “to continuously try to be mindful of how” she loved the kids and presented herself “to them and the teachers.” Olivia also said she tried “to live that [being a follower of Christ] out in” her life and tried to “make it apparent” that she was a Christian.

These women’s stories support the notion that teacher identity matters, as well as Palmer’s (2007) claim that, ““Who is the self that teaches?”... is the most fundamental question we can ask about teaching and those who teach—for the sake of learning and those who learn” (p. 8). Repeating this view is Korthagen (2004) with his views on the relationships between teacher behavior and sense of mission, as he argues for more research that takes spirituality and mission seriously.

The “so what?” of this research is partly situated in the scarcity of research on religious understandings within teacher education. Scholars, such as Madeleine Grumet, Gloria Ladson Billings, bell hooks, Geneva Gay, Jonathan Kozol, Lisa Delpit, and Michael Apple, argue that issues of identity—such as gender, race, sexuality, and socio-economic class—matter to students and teachers. Religion needs to be added to this list. I support and echo the sentiments of Burke and Segall (2011) who state, “... we might ask the same questions of religion that we, as educators, have come to ask of gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic class—among many other political identities that come to matter in and affect classrooms—in educational scholarship” (p. 653). And I align with White (2010) who claims, “Additional analysis that

incorporates religious understanding into this multicultural paradigm is needed” (p. 43). Teacher educators should not ignore the religious identities of students and the role religion plays in learning to teach, for to do so would be to ignore and dismiss a salient part of many education students’ identities. Silence surrounding religion could also prevent education students from understanding their positionality and perspectives regarding issues of religion and students from diverse backgrounds.

Reframing Good/Bad

According to an individual’s beliefs—s/he may see Christianity as problematic or beneficial to the field of teacher education—or somewhere in between. I hope this research does not over-simplify religious understandings or present a good/bad assessment of my participants’ values and beliefs. Even though I have questioned contexts and discourses, my intent is not to present a false and/or unhelpful dichotomy. I have experienced this during some conversations in academia when colleagues view religious students as a problem. As in, “I wouldn’t want those [religious] students in the public school classroom.” In contrast, when I discuss my work within my social community, most respond with an endorsing, “How wonderful that students have such caring and committed (Christian) teachers.” Pro/con arguments can be made on both sides. For example, viewing teaching as a religious calling may lead to a greater sense of commitment to the field. Feeling accountable to God may cause teachers to respond to students with more empathy and kindness. Valuing sacrificial love may make some teachers more willing to stay in a challenging profession. In reverse, personal religious beliefs (and a lack of awareness about other religions) may lead to certain discourses and values being privileged in public schools. This may cause misunderstanding toward different religions and may create contexts that other and discriminate against those of differing religious or non-religious

traditions. But the goal of this study is not to argue whether Christian religious beliefs are “good or bad” for the field of teacher education. The goal is to better understand the role religion plays in pre-service teachers lives and its influence on the process of learning to teach—and to further research and conversations surrounding religious beliefs in teacher education. This can be done in a way that does not create a false dichotomy, but provides a space for this aspect of identity to be respected, while at the same time asking questions and furthering understanding and dialogue across difference.

Religious beliefs are personal, complex, and often tied to how students name themselves. If teacher educators want to deconstruct issues of identity, then religion must be a part of that conversation. However, contexts must be created to help these discussions occur. The approach cannot come from a good/bad construct, but must begin with a desire to understand and acknowledge how students make sense of the world. If the conversation does not begin from this place, students may choose silence and true dialogue will not occur.

Reflexivity, Possibilities, and Future Research

Identity Problems

In many ways, I found this research to be emotionally challenging. I had moments when I thought, “*Why* did I decide to study religion?!” The challenge I describe stems from, again, issues of identity, and perhaps is an indicator to why some scholars may be hesitant to engage in this type of work. It gets personal and messy. I identify as a Christian, and even though that identity is fluid and complex, it has been a steady current flowing through my life. I also now identify as a scholar and have been trained to analyze and question. Of course, there is no (good) reason why these two aspects of my identity should create tension simply because they co-exist. But I had a difficult time removing myself from perceived expectations from the different

“sides” within these arguably different cultures. For example, I have heard a steady critique of religious (especially Christian) students within different scholarly contexts during my doctoral program. I wondered if my academic community would expect a good hearty critique of *these* Christian women and their faith. On the other hand, I have met education students who did not feel comfortable sharing their religious identity (both Christian and non-Christian) within academia because they felt their beliefs were not treated in a respectful manner. At times, I felt uncertain about how to represent my participants due to this perceived tension between academic and faith communities. I mentioned this dichotomy in the previous section, but it goes beyond even the good/bad depiction of education students to conversations on religious belief and intellectual rigor.

It seems religious faith and academia can be uneasy bedfellows. In the arena of the public university, religious conviction can be looked upon as anti-intellectual. For example, Carol M. Swain, a professor at Vanderbilt University, wrote in a forum for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that she found herself an “outsider” in higher education when she became a “born-again Christian” (Swain, 2005, p. B12). Swain experienced “forms of intimidation” often in “the form of openly disparaging remarks made by colleagues about the intelligence of believers” (p. B12). She questions higher education’s commitment to diversity:

... institutions of higher learning can, and should, do better. Many operate in ways that reveal no real desire for diversity or inclusion beyond the visible differences of gender and race. They have little interest in diversifying their faculties in terms of political philosophy or religious beliefs. Instead, the elite institutions, with which I am most familiar, have seemingly decided that they are in sole possession of the intellectual

knowledge, values, and insights needed to train future leaders—and that knowledge is secular and material. (p. B12)

George M. Marsden, author of *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, also references the reluctance of academia to allow religious perspectives. A report in *The New York Times* “quoted a political scientist as observing that ‘if a professor proposed to study something from a Catholic or Protestant point of view, it would be treated like proposing to study something from a Martian point of view’” (Marsden, 1996, p. 10). Marsden believes several factors contribute to academia’s reluctance to include religious perspectives. Some academics “fear a reinstatement of a Christian establishment,” while others think Christians are just “trying to get in on the culture of complaint” (p. 10). Scientific positivism also plays a role, since some academics believe religious statements are “insufficiently empirical to meet the standards of modern academia” (pp. 10-11). Marsden also suggests some academics are “exorcising religious ghosts from their own experience and believe that all right-thinking people should do the same” (p. 11), but Marsden views the strongest objection to a religious perspective in academia is the belief that religion should be relegated to the private domain. Keeping religious views private has become the academic culture, yet Marsden believes faith and intellect are not so easily separated. Academics’ fears of “the so called ‘fundamentalists’” (p. 11) and perspectives that “would disrupt mainstream academia” (p.11) have led to all religious perspectives being “discouraged or eliminated” (p. 12). Marsden states:

Once one gets beyond regarding explicit religious expression as though it were all extreme, or at least inherently disruptive to the public interest, its near absence from mainstream academic inquiry begins to look more peculiar. Many academics are

“personally” religious, but few spend any time reflecting on the implications of their faith for their intellectual life. One might suppose that the affirmation of belief in a being so momentous as the God of Christianity or of Judaism ... would have considerable implications about what else one believed about reality, culture, society, human needs, and morality. (p. 12)

Marsden questions why mainstream institutions do not have scholars, outside of theology, who represent various Christian schools of thought. He attributes self-censorship as a cause of the silence due to the given academic culture where religion is tolerated if treated as a “private hobby,” and where religious beliefs are often deemed “intellectually irrelevant” (p. 13). Marsden believes there is a “real phenomenon of lack of representation for religious viewpoints” (p. 14).

Since I am familiar with and occupy both these generalized culture camps (Christian faith communities and academia), I often found myself with one foot in each. I wanted to honor the stories and beliefs of my participants, as well as raise questions about those beliefs. I think I found a balance with the inclusion of the chapters’ discussion sections, while allowing the participants’ voices to be heard in the previous sections of the chapters. However, at times, I too wrestled with the constructs of good/bad; honoring/dishonoring; private/public; Christian/scholarly. These dichotomies are so much a part of (my) culture, I had to remind myself that I did not have to choose between camps. But the perception (and perhaps reality) of these “sides” may also contribute to the hesitancy to discuss religious beliefs in academic settings.

Encouraging Discussion

Teacher educators need to examine how to move beyond these dichotomies and engage students in discussions about cultures, perspectives, and their influences on learning and

teaching. In short, we must find a way to discuss religion to better understand diversity in schooling and society. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) talk about the value of discussion in a democratic society, and how “discussion and democracy are inseparable because both have the same root purpose—to nurture and promote human growth” (p. 3). They state:

By growth we mean roughly the same thing as John Dewey (1916) did: the development of an ever-increasing capacity for learning and an appreciation of and sensitivity to learning undertaken by others. Democracy and discussion imply a process of giving and taking, speaking and listening, describing and witnessing—all of which help expand horizons and foster mutual understanding. (pp. 3-4)

To help encourage this type of discussion, Brookfield and Preskill recommend that “students and teachers need to practice certain dispositions” (p. 8). There are nine dispositions mentioned, but I would like to focus on three: hospitality, mindfulness, and autonomy.

Hospitality is defined through the work of Parker Palmer as “an atmosphere in which people feel invited to participate” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 8-9). This type of environment helps others “to take risks and to reveal strongly held opinions” (p. 9). Brookfield and Preskill encourage building this type of classroom community by having students share personal histories, and also by presenting their own views on “key educational issues” and offering a “critique of these views” (p. 9). They state, “We hope to show in this way that every view is subject to criticism but that this can be done with respect and dignity” (p. 9). Hospitality “implies a mutual receptivity to new ideas and perspectives and a willingness to question even the most widely held assumptions” (p. 9).

Mindfulness is described as the “paying of attention” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 11) to another’s words. Brookfield and Preskill argue “teachers must model a high level of

attentiveness to convey the importance of being mindful” and “strain to hear and to understand, fully and correctly, what is being said” (p. 11). Mindfulness also includes “what political theorist Mark Kingwell (1995) calls *tact*” (p. 11). This includes instructors and students paying attention to what voices have been heard and not heard.

Lastly, autonomy allows individuals to “hold to an opinion not widely shared by others” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 17). Brookfield and Preskill state:

We want to understand and honor autonomy as a temporary state, a kind of “provisional resting place” (Barber, 1994) where an individual can claim that “this is what I believe in and stand for at this particular point in time.” But that same individual should also be willing to subject those convictions to continuous reevaluation and possible revision, on the understanding that these new convictions may, in Barber’s words, be “repossessed” again in the future. (p. 17)

In other words, individuals who feel strongly about certain issues are given the space to “take a stand” (p. 17).

I mention these three dispositions because of their importance to conversations about religious beliefs. I know from personal experience in teacher education courses that students who do not perceive the existence of hospitality, mindfulness, and autonomy will not contribute to the conversation. I have spoken with religious students of different faith traditions who expressed how their religious view were discounted or judged as illegitimate within teacher education classrooms. The participants in this study did not experience this type of dismissal, but perhaps others in their cohort did. Again, I think of non-Christian students and wonder about their perception of the classroom community. To move forward in the examination of religious (or non-religious) understandings, Brookfield and Preskill’s context of hospitality, mindfulness,

and autonomy must be cultivated. Whether it be a commitment to devout Christian beliefs, or a commitment to non-belief, true discussion will not occur in contexts that seek to assess, instead of to understand.

Next Steps

As I think about future research, I want to complicate the religious/academic dichotomy often found in the scholarship or within academic conversations. I hope I found a balance in this study and that I raised questions while honoring my participants' stories. However, I acknowledge that there is "something" about religious belief that perhaps makes it particularly difficult to discuss and examine. As mentioned, many scholars and teacher educators address other issues of identity, while religion seems to be left on the table as something untouchable. I say this in no way to minimize how difficult it can be to discuss and examine issues such as race, social class, gender, and sexuality. Clearly, teacher educators are still figuring out ways to talk about many aspects of identity in thoughtful, helpful, and powerful ways. Yet, even as a researcher who shares the religious beliefs of her participants, I found I was cautious regarding how to write about their religious views. I am still coming to understand all that is involved in conquering concerns about discussing and examining religious understandings. It is admittedly tricky to respectfully create spaces for others to share about the intersection of religious beliefs and teaching, while also asking thoughtful and analytical questions about what those beliefs may do to teachers and students.

Teacher education.

After completing this study, others have asked what advice I would give to teacher educators. What should teacher educators *do* to address the intersection of teaching and religious beliefs? I have argued that more discussion is needed and have talked about certain conditions

that could aid discussion. *But what else?* I suggest that the first step would be to create spaces, or perhaps a course, within the programmatic structures of education programs that intentionally discuss religious views. Many teacher education programs that focus on social justice address issues of multiculturalism and self-identity. Adding religious belief to such a course or syllabus could be a helpful first step. At the very least, some discussion surrounding the basics of the role of religion in American schooling and the history and implications of the separation of church and state could help mediate misunderstandings. However, as I mentioned earlier, religion seems to be a topic many are hesitant to touch. It could arguably be considered a (no pun intended) sacred space, off limits for debate. But again, I believe conversations should be started, even if they are awkward, uncomfortable, and places where both teacher educators and students are learning to navigate the dialogue.

Teacher educators could also conduct more research on the experiences of students from different faith traditions within public schooling. Kerri, the Jewish student who carpooled with Amy, shared her frustration regarding Christian privilege during her past schooling experiences. We need more stories that personalize and reveal some of the challenges and experiences found by others in regard to religion and schooling. As you might expect a narrative inquirer to say, stories are powerful and can open the reader's eyes to dilemmas, bias, and injustice. Teacher educators need to research and share the stories of others to help promote understanding.

The inclusion and discussion of religious beliefs could also be addressed by investigating the us/them or in-group/out-group tendency of individuals. Perhaps teacher educators can help education students examine why individuals and groups often seek to protect like-minded peers, and in reverse, question those who share differing views. We see this in the national dialogue about politics mixed in and conflated with religion. The us/them talk and framing often hinders

understanding and listening, so the challenge is how to reconsider these framings that often permeate American culture. In other words, we can better understand how and why others may protect their identities as we seek to do the same.

The unknown and lingering questions.

Even with numerous interviews and pages and pages of transcripts, there were certain topics and questions that it would have been helpful to revisit for clarity. I also want to acknowledge that there are certain answers or data that perhaps are noticeably *not* present in this study. For example, I really did not gain much understanding about what the experience of student teaching did for (and to) the participants. I had some sense of how these contexts reinforced their views regarding their abilities as teachers, such as having others affirm their teaching skills or experiencing success in the classroom. Many of the women also said they enjoyed their student teaching experience despite certain challenges that arose. However, I did not come away with any significant understanding regarding their student teaching placements changing or challenging their views on teaching. Student teaching also did not seem to cause them to wrestle with their religious faith, other than the ways I previously mentioned (wondering how to handle students talking about God, what they could say about their faith in that context, what the legalities were, etc.). Many of the participants did demonstrate reflection regarding their religious beliefs in the student teaching setting, but this seemed related to our meetings and the interview questions that seemed to encourage this reflection. I still believe the student teaching semester was an appropriate time to examine the intersection of their faith and teaching, but there was still much to know about their specific placements and what occurred there.

Another context, their teacher education courses and program, provided some data, but also raised questions about how religion is talked about (or not talked about) in this setting. I

mentioned times when the participants became aware of their religious beliefs in their coursework (Mary and the profanity in the writing book, Amy's fast and her views on providing food to students, Olivia's description of a discussion on holidays in public schools), but I had many more questions about what was said and not said in their teacher education courses. I know there were side conversations about religion and some whole class discussions at times. However, there was little mention of their religious beliefs bumping up against any content or discussions in these courses. I can only speculate what that means. This could be an indicator of the religious homogeneity and a built-in sense of sameness, or could point to an overall lack of discussion about religion by their instructors, or could indicate that their instructors did an effective job creating a welcoming space for their religious views. This lack of data, and my sense of not knowing, speaks again to the need for more research.

A finding from this study that also warrants more consideration is the religious homogeneity of the education cohort. I knew beginning this research, both from personal experience and from peers, that early childhood often has overtly Christian students. I concluded the study with many questions about the influence of this context—not just for Christian students, but for non-Christian students, and for the instructors who teach them. I think about the Jewish students in the participants' cohort and wonder about their experiences within a group that overwhelmingly identifies with Christianity, especially when the student teaching context may also reflect similar beliefs. I also think about the university supervisor who was most likely surprised when prayer, praise reports, and God became the focus of a small group student teacher meeting. What was the instructor thinking in that moment? More research is needed to discover: 1- To what degree early childhood education students identify as Christian. 2- What are the experiences of non-Christian education students within these contexts? 3- How do university

instructors navigate education students' religious beliefs in their classes? 4- In what ways are issues of religion discussed in teacher education contexts?

The Four Women

Before I conclude, I offer one more description of the women in this study. As the author of this narrative inquiry, my intent was to invite the reader into the conversations and to provide an opportunity to listen to, and in some ways, come to know them. I realize no one will have the same sense of “knowing” as I did—since I had the opportunity to sit with them, listen, and experience these conversations. But here, in this final section before my conclusion, I want to offer one more chance to invite the reader into their stories, their process of becoming a teacher, and their final thoughts during the interviewing process.

Amy

When I think of Amy, I think about relationships. In fact in my data analysis binder, I wrote “relationships” as a heading next to her name. She was very concerned about how she treated others and was continuously thinking about ways she could help others. When I asked her why she agreed to do this study, she said:

Okay, so I guess when I got that [recruitment questionnaire] ... I was like well ... my [Christian] beliefs play a lot into how I live my life and how I would use that in my profession and whatnot. I definitely related to that and then I basically was like well, if she's wanting me to come in and tell her about why I live the way I do, I didn't know whether or not you were a believer or whatever and so I was just like, you know what, that would just be an awesome opportunity for me to go and share my faith and my beliefs with somebody. And I don't know, so that's basically why. That I was like, if nothing else, I'll be able to talk with them, and they'll be all ears about what I believe.

I joked with Amy that I was “a captive audience” to listen to her beliefs. She responded that she saw it as a “cool opportunity.” In hindsight, I would have liked to ask Amy if she felt she had many opportunities to share her faith and what role evangelism played in her beliefs. My impression was that she had viewed her Christian faith to be a powerful, positive influence in her life and looked for opportunities for others to know about it.

As I mentioned earlier, all the participants were involved in faith communities, which included a substantial amount of volunteer work. During several of our interviews, Amy was dressed in a ministry t-shirt as she was about to go volunteer at her church. She also described attending worship conferences and participating in an event to help end sex trafficking. Amy was busy and actively involved in issues that mattered to her. During our final interview she informed me of her impending trip to Central America where she was going to teach for a year. This was a challenging decision, as she had also recently become engaged. However, while she would be teaching abroad, her fiancé would most likely be attending a ministry school in another state.

During our final interview, we talked about Christianity in the greater culture, and I asked Amy whether she perceived any cultural shifts regarding being a Christian. This discussion followed a question regarding why she put “follower of Jesus” on the questionnaire. Amy said:

I had a conversation with a friend who.... She’s been one of my best friends since elementary school ... I was asking her about ... how she viewed God and her beliefs and what she would categorize herself as. I said, “So would you say that you’re a Christian?” and she said, “Well, unfortunately, I’ve had so many interactions with people who call themselves Christians, but are just judgmental.”... she was like, “Basically ... whatever they are, I don’t want to call myself that.”.... I feel like a lot of people are making that

division, distinction, yeah. But I mean, rightfully so. Christianity has in a lot of ways earned reputations like that.

Amy talked about others who had “negative experiences” with people who are “super, super religious” and “not open to other people’s views or even open to listening to other people about that sort of thing.” Amy called them “Bible thumpers” and said “especially in the South, when you hear Christian, it’s like, middle class or upper class, White families...” Amy did not identify in that way and wondered when I distributed the recruitment questionnaire if I was “skeptical about people viewing [teaching] as a calling.” This talk about perception and bias made me realize (again) the need to create spaces regarding others’ experiences surrounding issues of religious beliefs.

Mary

The heading I wrote next to Mary’s name was “still trying to figure it out.” When I think of Mary, I usually smile, because I found her to be refreshingly open and honest. I appreciated her candor as she sought answers, and at times, wrestled with the some of the realities of teaching.

When I asked Mary why she agreed to be in this study, she said:

I felt like ... when you talked about it, I was like, “I should really do that.” And I guess to help remind myself why I’m in the education program and why I feel like God is calling me to this and also to help you. Because I feel like if I was in your position, and I really needed people, I wouldn’t want everybody to just blow it off and act like it’s not important. I feel like I would want people to help me out, so I felt like I should help you.

I suppose all researchers are appreciative when they get participants, but it was touching and surprising that some of the women participated because they wanted to help me.

My final interview with Mary took place at a McDonalds halfway between her home and the university town. We sat in a booth and talked as Mary told me about applying for different teaching positions and how she was trying “not to get discouraged” during the process. This was time of transition for Mary, as she was now married and settling into her new life with her husband.

Mary and I also talked about Christianity in the culture during this final interview. She said:

I just think of the people standing out on the street yelling at people, telling them they’re going to Hell. I feel like that’s the public—like the outside view of Christianity is that we’re pushy and ... and they say that they’re doing that for God, but I don’t believe it, that’s not how God is, that’s not how Jesus represented it in the Bible. So I don’t know, I feel like people outside of it don’t have a good view of it. I think the church is working on it and making it better, but I don’t know, I feel like there’s a negative, like goody-two shoes kind of view of it in general I guess.

Mary understood she had certain views regarding religion and said it would be “neat” to have more opportunities to hear about others’ different beliefs. She said it might help consider things “that you didn’t necessarily think of” or “open up a lot of interesting conversations and discussions.”

Sarah

Written next to Sarah’s name in my notebook was “clear, specific, certain,” which was also a reflection of her quiet confidence. When I asked her why she had agreed to participate in this study, she said:

I agreed to do it because I thought it would be a really cool experience, and I know that if I was doing studies, and I was just asking people to come—like when you came into our class that day and asked for help, I was like, “Why not?” This will give me an excuse to come back to --- and I also see it as a form of sharing my testimony in a way, because I’m not necessarily brave enough to stand up in front of a ton of people and talk about it, but I just feel like if my thoughts and kind of testimony, because I guess I kind of gave that the first day, I thought that if it could help anything, just one person with a research study, then that would be a really cool opportunity for me. So I just thought it was a neat outlet that was provided. Yeah, I thought it’d be interesting.

Again, there was a focus on helping me, and possibly others, through her participation.

Sarah and I talked a little about the perception of Christianity in the current culture during our final interview. She described sometimes being cautious to share that she is a Christian, and said:

Yeah, whenever I meet somebody new, and I’m not sure ... where they identify and if they like Christians or not, or if they like religion or not, I do put up somewhat of a defense just to guard myself from that, because if they lash out at me, and are like, oh, you’re probably a Christian, then that would really hurt my feelings kind of thing, and so I’m very cautious with telling people that just right off the bat, because I don’t like the backlash from it. It’s not that I’m not proud of it ...

Sarah said she felt like “there’s a pushback ... against Christians and maybe even other religions too” and that it might be that “people are feeling like they are fighting against oppression for not being religious, and they don’t want to be religious, and so people are coming back and saying

nasty things about religious people ...” She felt like we are living in a time where “you’re not really supposed to talk about religion or something.”

We also talked about individuals who qualify what type of Christian they are. For example, Sarah commented—clarifying that you are not “the crazy kind” of Christian. She said sometimes she would explain she was a Christian, but would not “shove it down your throat.” This conversation revealed again how personal and sensitive discussing religious beliefs can be.

Olivia

Finally, written next to Olivia’s name was “sweet, advanced, thoughtful.” As previously mentioned, I appreciated how Olivia paused and considered my questions. When I asked Olivia why she had agreed to do this study, she said:

Because . . . doing the survey [the recruitment questionnaire], as I’m doing the survey, I was like, “Oh, this is interesting.” And I knew that I had opinions, and I knew that I fit into one side or the other of what you were looking for, and so I was like, “Sure, why not?” I’ll just see what she has to say, because I know sometimes they say, “We may call you, but we may not.” And so I was like, “Oh okay, we’ll see.” And so I think it just sounded interesting to me, and I knew I would have something to provide whether it was exactly what you were looking for or not. I think that’s probably why, it just sounded interesting to me.

Olivia told me she had participated in a research study before, which helped her decision to volunteer for this one. She realized after meeting with the other researcher, that it was just talking with someone. Olivia then asked me some insightful questions regarding what leads individuals to volunteer for research studies. She was wondering if samples resulted in interviewing solely people who like to talk or are “really opinionated.” This was not the first

time Olivia asked me a question I could not answer, and I commented that she was thinking like a researcher.

We also talked about cultural perceptions of Christianity during our final interview and how “Christian” can take on different meanings. Olivia said:

... I try to make it apparent that I am a Christian, and that I believe in those values and morals and everything that goes along with that, and not just saying, oh yeah, “Christian,” just to check it off ... you know, when it [a survey] asks you. And so I really think that happens a lot, that people feel like they need to qualify, or say why or ... what type of Christian they are, because I think the world’s become so much of just like, “Oh yeah, I’m a Christian.” But what does that mean? You can just mark “Christian,” but then maybe everything underlying the Christian faith, this person might not do. Or maybe this person does a couple of them, or maybe this person believes in some of it, but not all of it. I think ... it’s hard because there’s this huge clump of Christians, but that includes these bad experiences that people have had with Christians, which maybe are Christians that are really Christians or maybe it’s people that are just saying they’re Christians. I don’t know. It’s this whole spectrum of things that I don’t have any idea how anyone would actually judge that and figure that out. I think it definitely—when somebody says, “I’m a Christian,” like openly in a conversation, I feel like they’re also ready to explain what that means. Because I feel like they know somebody’s going to ask what that means. And I think if you aren’t ready to say that, then that might be somebody who would just check Christian off on a form but wouldn’t openly say it, maybe.

Olivia’s comments reflect the complexity of identity once again. Identifiers and language are complex and reflect different meanings for those who use them.

Summary

The four women were all incredibly helpful and willing to speak with me about the intersection of their religious understandings and teaching. I learned a great deal from my meetings with them. They helped me think carefully about aspects of teacher education I had not considered before. I became more aware of the ways education students walk into classrooms with certain views, hesitation, and the need to talk. I think of Mary's comment—that she wished her cohort had been given more opportunities to openly discuss (without judgment) the challenges of teaching. I want to be a part of helping to create such spaces.

Conclusion

Until recently, the spiritual aspect of a teacher's calling has been largely overlooked in teacher education (Mayes et al., 2003). It is not surprising that education, a field attracting students who are "highly" religious (Kimball et al., 2009 p. 22), would include students who view teaching as calling. Religion is certainly not the only influence in these women's lives—issues of identity are, of course, complex. However, what we can conclude from these women's stories is the need for more discussion around the import of teachers' (both pre-service and in-service) religious understandings.

Even though education students may be talking about their Christian beliefs with one another or during class introductions, it is unclear the degree their beliefs are discussed within the formal content of education courses. There may not be sufficient opportunity to discuss the import and influence of their religious beliefs, for themselves and their students. It is difficult to conclude what may hinder the discussion of religious beliefs within teacher education. Perhaps, as Sarah states, religion is simply a taboo subject. Or perhaps, educators do not know how to begin the conversation. At any rate, White (2009) argues some education students want to

discuss religion, but do not have the space to do so, and perhaps in-service teachers would like this opportunity as well. Certain narratives of teaching (*teaching as a calling; teaching as innate ability; teaching as love and care*) seemed to be furthered by the contexts in this study. There needs to be more discussion on what these narratives do, to the teachers who adopt them and to the students in their classrooms.

As I recall Heidi's e-mail at the beginning of this study, I contemplate how I could have offered her more support. I struggled to know what to do when student teaching brought up issues of identity tethered to her religious beliefs. After this study, I have a greater appreciation regarding how understandings surrounding religion and teaching may overlap, especially for Christian women. I better comprehend some of the pressures and expectations Christian women feel regarding their role as teacher. I also better comprehend some of the critical questions that need to be discussed in teacher education courses. If I could go back and talk to Heidi during her student teaching semester, I would ask her more about her sense of calling and her vision of the ideal teacher and Christian. I suspect her responses would be similar to the participants' stories here. I could create a space for her to talk about and consider narratives and inherited discourses that surround the work of a teacher, as well as talk about different views on calling situated within faith communities. We could also critically discuss how religious beliefs inform teachers' approaches to classroom communities. More than anything else, I feel I could offer her support regarding the struggles of a complicated profession often romanticized in a way not helpful to those who occupy it.

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APPENDIX A

Identity and Calling Questionnaire

1. What is the name of the education program you are enrolled in at ---⁵?

Early Childhood Education

Elementary Education

Middle School Education

(Content Specific Program) Education

2. When is the estimated time for the completion of your coursework within your education program?

At the end of the Fall semester 2012

At the end of the Spring semester 2013

At the end of the Summer block 2013

At the end of the Fall semester 2013

3. Think about meeting people for the first time. You want to tell them about yourself so that they'll really know you. What would you tell them first, second, third?

4. Did your religious beliefs influence your decision to become a teacher?

5. Do you feel "called to teach" or consider teaching your calling?

If yes, do religious beliefs influence your views on calling?

6. Do you consider yourself religious?

If yes, what is your religious affiliation?

(optional) 8. What is your gender?

(optional) 9. What is your age?

(optional) 10*. **If you identify as religious and consider teaching a calling**, would you like to know more about this study or possibly participate?

If yes, please include your name and e-mail address here:

⁵ The name of the institution (identifying information) was removed.

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

Initial interview: Personal history

- Where were you born? Where did you grow up?
 - Describe your family to me? How would you describe your relationship with your family?
 - What values were important to your family? Why do you think they had these values?
 - What was your life like as a child?
 - Growing up, did your family consider themselves part of any particular religious group? What group? What did being a part of that group mean to your family? To you?
 - How do you define religion? How do you define your specific religion?
 - What did religion mean in your everyday lives?
 - What do your religious beliefs mean to you today?
 - What religious practices do you engage in (services, meditation, worship, prayer)?
 - Do you consider religion to be a part of your identity?
 - What terms would you use to describe or define yourself?
 - How has your identity changed over the years?
-
- What schools did you attend as a child? What did you think about school?
 - What did you think about teachers or teaching? Tell me about your classmates, what did you think about your peers?
 - How did you choose this university? What were some of your thoughts as you began your university career?
 - What education program did you choose?
 - What led to that decision? Why did you choose teaching?
 - How did you decide to become an education major? How did you choose your program? What experiences or interactions influenced your decision to go into teaching?
 - Why do you want to teach?
 - What do you think is your role as a teacher?
 - Describe yourself as a future teacher.

Interview: Calling and Teacher Education

- How do you define calling? Why do you think you define it in that way? Who influenced your view of calling?
 - What is the influence of your religion on your calling? How did you come to understand/define religious calling?
 - How do you see teaching as a calling? What does that mean to you? Is there a difference between a calling and religious calling?
 - Do you believe that you were called by God to teach?
 - How do you think that will influence what/how you will teach? Or your relationships with students?
 - How has viewing teaching as a calling influenced your experiences in your teacher education classes? Or with your cohort outside the classroom?
 - Have you discussed your views with other students or professors? What has been your experience in those interactions? What did you think during those conversations?
-
- When you first started taking your education classes, was the program what you had imagined?
 - Have your religious beliefs influenced your experiences in your program?
 - Do you express beliefs based on your religion in your teacher education classes? Why or why not?
 - Think about a particular lesson or conversation in a class when you became especially aware of your religious beliefs? Tell me about that. (Probe: What did you think of the lesson?)
 - Think about a specific reading you had in a class that caused you to think about your religious beliefs? Did you talk to anyone about the reading? Tell me about that conversation? (Probe: What did the reading cause you to think about?)
-
- What is your overall impression of your education program?
 - What do you think is the purpose or goal of the program? Why do you think that?
 - Think about your religious beliefs and the purposes within your education program? What comes to mind?
 - Have you experienced any conflict between your internal religious convictions and expectations in your teacher education classrooms?
-
- If you were to give advice to a religious student entering the program, what would you say?
 - How do you think your teacher education classes will influence your future teaching?
 - How do you think your experiences within your program will influence your future?
-
- When I say “student teaching” what do you think of? What do you imagine it to be like? Why do you think you have those perceptions of student teaching?
 - How do you think viewing teaching as a calling will influence your student teaching?

Student Teaching Interviews

- How is everything going?
- What do you think about student teaching right now?
 - What interactions with teachers have stood out for you? What were you thinking during that conversation?
 - What interactions with students have stood out for you? What were you thinking during that conversation or moment?
 - What interactions have you had with your peers in the program? Tell me about your thoughts during your conversations.
 - What influence has your student teaching seminar had on how you view student teaching? What conversations in the seminar have influenced your thinking?
- How are you thinking about yourself as teacher right now? What has influenced those thoughts?
- What are your thoughts on viewing teaching as a calling right now? What does that mean to you right now?
- Are you able to act upon that belief during student teaching? In what ways?
- Are you struggling with anything right now? What is influencing this struggle?

Final Interview

- Now that student teaching is over, what do think about the experience?
 - Do you still view teaching as a calling? A religious calling?
 - How has that meaning been influenced by your student teaching experiences?
 - How has your interactions with others impacted your meaning and understanding of calling?
 - How do you see your calling being acted upon in your future classroom?
-