Faith and teaching: What teachers' stories reveal

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Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning
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Griffith University

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Education and Professional Studies - Research

October 2023

Abstract

This study is a narrative inquiry into the stories of four teachers in a Christian school. It used a Deweyan-inspired aesthetic framework to analyze how teachers in Christian schools conceptualized and enacted the connections between their Christian identity and their practice. By exploring the relationship between faith and teaching, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion in Christian education about what it means to teach Christianly. It also considers whether the act of narrating their stories had an influence on teachers' self-concept and/or their practice; possibly highlighting a potential use of narratives in teacher education and development. The study concludes that Christian teachers in this study conceptualized the faith and teaching relationship in personal terms through their dispositions and understandings as teachers; relationally, in their interactions with students and colleagues; and pedagogically in the understood purpose behind all that they do as teachers. Moreover, the extent to which they comprehended and enacted the faith and teaching relationship was impacted by the training they received regarding Christian education and their personal wrestle with the idea of teaching Christianly.

Keywords

aesthetic experience, aesthetic framework, biblical worldview integration, coherence, faith-integrated teaching and learning, narrative identity, metanarrative, narrative inquiry

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Francesca Alma Nathan

Acknowledgements

This research project has been a fulfilling but strenuous journey; one I certainly could not have managed alone. I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Peter Grootenboer and Associate Professor Katherine Main for their consistent encouragement and support that kept me buoyed and focused to the end. My husband and children deserve much credit and many thanks, too, for their enduring patience with my divided attention and time while completing this project. Dear friends and conversation partners have also cheered me on with their unwavering interest in my research endeavours and keen insights. Gisella S., Jacqui S., and Bronwyn W.: a heartfelt thank you.

In addition, I am grateful to the participant teachers who generously entrusted me with their stories for this study. Thank you also to all the other teachers and school leaders who welcomed me into their communities to share my learnings along the way. You are all an inspiration.

Most importantly, my deepest gratitude goes to God, whose grand story has made my own story and this research journey all the more meaningful.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

There are many things that teachers want to know about teaching. Palmer (2017) observed that the questions most often asked by teachers revolve around content, pedagogy, and maybe even philosophy of education; "but seldom, if ever, do we ask the 'who' question—who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world?" (p. 2). While the ubiquity of research on teacher identity in the past two decades would suggest a growing recognition of the importance of understanding the teacher, it also suggests that the complexity of the teacher self leaves much room for exploration and discovery, especially in specific contexts.

This study is a narrative inquiry into four Christian teachers' stories: an attempt to discover the 'who' behind the teacher in Christian schools and the manner in which their faith-identity influences their practice. Through narratives, the teachers' understanding of how faith relates to teaching and learning were examined. This study emerged from my engagement in Christian education both in local and international contexts, and from my particular interest in supporting and encouraging teachers and leaders who work within these contexts.

In Chapter 1, the specific context and aims of this project are explained and a rationale for the relevance and significance of the project is provided. The literature review in Chapter 2 outlines how this study is situated within the wider context of faith-based education research. The theoretical framework that guides the research methodology, the methods for data collection and analysis, and the necessary ethical considerations for such an endeavor are described in Chapter 3. Summaries of the teachers' stories are presented in Chapter 4, followed in Chapter 5 by a discussion of findings. Finally, the concluding chapter contains a summary of findings, limitations and recommendations, and a final story.

A key understanding in narrative inquiry is that the researcher does not stand outside the study as a detached observer or collector of stories. Rather, the researcher and the participants are co-researchers, complicit in the outcome of stories told; because *what* and *how* the stories are told are shaped even by the mere interaction between storyteller and active listener (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 2010). This inquiry begins, therefore, with the telling of my own story, drawing from it the musings, fascinations, and consternations that have brought about the research puzzle. My personal voice is also included at the end stages of this inquiry, when the stories of the participants and the whole process of relating through stories shall have reshaped my own.

1.1 Framing the problem

The relationship between faith and teaching and learning is an inherently salient concept in Christian education (Cairney, 2018; Edlin, 2014; Roy, 2008; D. I. Smith, 2018; Witwer, 2022). While there are ample philosophical and theological resources available to engage with this issue, the potential contributions of the Christian teachers' perspective on the matter is often neglected (Palmer, 2017; Witwer, 2022), with sometimes disappointing consequences. This idea was brought to bear during my term as head of secondary school in a fully accredited and well-established Christian international school in Southeast Asia.

In my third year at the school, a school-wide improvement plan was underway that included the implementation of a biblical worldview integration framework (the Framework) for curriculum and pedagogy. The initiative was intended to complement the review of curriculum and to align the pedagogical approach across the primary, middle, and high school departments. With teaching staff consisting of professionally certified, church-endorsed, Bible-believing Christian teachers, there was an assumption amongst school leadership that with additional training (essentially a review) in biblical worldview principles, there would be few roadblocks to implementation. We could not have been more mistaken.

As head of secondary school, my role was to supervise and support the implementation of the Framework in the high school division. I was required to review teachers' program and unit designs, conduct classroom observations, participate in subject area working groups, and facilitate one-on-one sessions with the staff to discuss their progress. I noticed that across subject areas, a number of the teachers struggled to incorporate the Framework, especially in their unit designs and learning plans. Several teachers took what could be described as a formulaic approach to the task—a step-by-step matching of biblical worldview ideas with their content—rather than applying the broad principles of biblical worldview integration that could influence their teaching. The limits of this approach were particularly noticeable in subject areas (e.g., maths) where a one-to-one correspondence to biblical concepts was not immediately obvious. Even among several of the veteran teachers, there appeared to be some confusion about what biblical worldview integration should look like in practice. This observation was surprising as, before the initiative, these very same teachers could not only articulate their commitment to the goals of biblical worldview integration, but also trace this commitment in their engagement with their students and with their subject matter. Yet, in formalising the process, the initiative almost became a foreign concept.

I left the school before the project was completed. There were a few success stories I could point to but, overall, the endeavour was confoundingly difficult. I never had a chance to debrief the experience with my colleagues, but I have often revisited that experience in my mind. From subsequent experiences in other Christian schools, especially around reform initiatives, I have concluded that the challenges I encountered in implementing the Framework began before the project was even introduced. The school leadership had decided on the goals for improvement based on outcomes of an accreditation review. An expert in biblical worldview integration from the United States of America (USA) was engaged to conduct the first series of workshops. Not

once during the school leadership's planning for this initiative do I ever recall consulting the practitioners themselves: the teachers.

It is a distinctive feature of goals for Christians schools around the world to have the Christian faith and ethos infused in their teaching and learning goals. Biblical worldview integration is but one approach towards that end. Witwer (2022) commented that it has proven easier to talk about such goals than to implement them. So while the discussion about the relationship between faith and teaching and learning has continued, the research around the same has been sparse (D. I. Smith & Smith, 2011); especially with regards to Christian teachers perspectives on the influence of their faith on their practice.

This study aims to contribute further to this discussion by focusing on teachers' understanding of how their faith relates to their teaching. It will approach the issue from a narrative perspective as personal stories allow for the exploration of teachers' lived experience of the phenomenon, sometimes even beyond what they may propositionally understand (Polkinghorne, 2010; Witwer, 2022).

1.2 Context

The independent schools sector in Australia comprises a significant and growing component in the Australian schooling system. In 2021, 15.4% (approximately 616,000) of over 4 million students in Australia were enrolled in 1127 independent schools throughout the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The independent schools sector represents a diverse range of schools in terms of size, focus, and affiliation; with 84% of them being religiously affiliated (Independent Schools Australia, 2021). Just like those schools with common educational philosophies and aims (e.g., Steiner schools), many of the religiously affiliated schools are governed and administered by systems. Notable among the protestant school systems are those administered by the Anglican, Lutheran, and Seventh Day Adventist churches.

The earliest Christian schools in Australia were established by the Anglicans in the 1700s (Buckingham, 2010). In the decades that followed, various Christian denominations sought to establish their own schools. This approach created a largely fragmented and divisive Christian schooling scene for the better part of the 1800s (Christian Schools Australia, 2020). It was an era "marked by denominational sectarianism driven by a dual agenda for education: to meet an educational need and to further the presence and influence of the established church" (Scott, 2012, p. 40). This rivalry between denominational schools was tempered in the1870s with the passing of the Education Act, which granted free secular public education for all children. Still, Christian education continued to advance, initially with the growth of largely mainstream Judeo-Christian institutions across the nation.

Since the 1970s, a distinct Christian school sector has developed steadily, largely propelled by the emergence of smaller, affordable, and more local Christian schools (Christian Schools Australia, 2020; Etherington, 2008; Symes & Gulson, 2005). Alongside these schools, several peak organizations have likewise been established to support and resource their affiliated network of schools. The largest of these include Christian Schools Australia (CSA) , Christian Education National (CEN), and the Australian Association of Christian Schools (AACS), which together represent over 250 schools across Australia, more than 100,000 students, and upwards of 10,000 teachers and staff (Australian Association of Christian Schools, n.d.; Christian Education National, n.d.; Christian Schools Australia, n.d.).

This study was conducted within the context of the Christian school sector in Australia. In particular, it involved teachers from a Christian school, which is a member of one of the peak bodies mentioned above.

1.3 Purpose

This study is an exploration of narratives of teachers in a Christian school to inquire into their understanding of the relationship between their faith and their practice. It used a Deweyan-

based aesthetic framework to analyze how teachers conceptualize the relationship between their Christian faith and their teaching practices. It highlighted the influence of their Christian beliefs on their passions, identity, and knowledge as teachers and the connections that they make between the Christian metanarrative and their teaching. Finally, an analysis was conducted to explore the impact of the act of narrating their stories (through participation in this study) on teachers' understanding of the relationship between their Christian identity and their practice.

1.4 Research Questions

Main Question:

How do Christian teachers in Christian schools conceptualize the relationship between their Christian faith and their teaching practice through their stories?

Sub-questions:

1. In the process of becoming and being a teacher, how do teachers' experiences influence their passions, knowledge, and self-concept?
2. In what ways is coherence reflected in these teachers' narratives? That is, how do they relate their past to their present and to future possibilities; and how do they make connections between themselves and their contexts, including the metanarrative of the Christian faith?
3. How does the telling of their narratives in this research impact the participants?

1.5 Significance

While interest in Christian faith-integrated learning and teaching has been growing steadily since the middle of the 1900s (Lo, 2020), research on Christian teaching and pedagogy continues to be limited (Smith, 2018; Witwer, 2022). This gap in the research also means that research on Christian teachers' experiences and perspectives is sparse. This study contributes generally to the ongoing concern in Christian education globally about what it means to teach Christianly, especially from the perspective of the teachers. More specifically, utilising an

aesthetic lens (Hobbs & Kelly, 2016) to explore teacher narratives provides nuanced insight into how teachers see themselves, expand their knowledge and understanding, and express their passions. This lens also makes possible the further exploration of how teachers view the influence of their faith on their teaching. In turn, this insight can suggest alternative approaches to ongoing teacher development—ones that focus on discovering, through their own narratives, their own commitments to the goals of Christian education and to improving their practice.

More broadly in education practice, teachers regardless of faith orientation, are guided by a worldview that shapes their philosophy of education. Not every teacher can easily articulate either their worldview or their teaching philosophy; but every teacher can tell stories of successful teaching moments or situations that reflect both. The focus on teacher narratives can provide insight into the identities, practices, and orientations of teachers in general. Such insight may in turn guide efforts at developing programs for professional learning and initial teacher education to support robust teaching and learning experiences for students.

1.6 Summary

In articulating the rationale, context, purpose, and significance of the study, this introductory chapter provides a backdrop for the research questions presented. The study is a narrative inquiry into the stories of Christian teachers teaching in a Christian school. This study seeks to contribute to the discussion about what it might mean to teach Christianly through exploring Christian teachers' views of the relationship between their Christian faith and their teaching practice. The process of exploration begins with a review of literature in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Teacher stories and what they reveal about the complex nature of the teaching profession and the teachers themselves have been the focus of interest in recent decades (Alsup, 2018; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). In Christian education, much of the current discussion has tended to revolve around issues of faith integration in teaching and learning. The question about what it means to teach Christianly requires a foregrounding of Christian teachers' experiences and narratives. This study engaged with the issue of what it means to teach Christianly by exploring the experiences of teachers in a Christian school and asking the often-sidelined question of who the Christian teacher is and how they view themselves and their practice within the context of Christian education.

This section provides a review of literature around issues related to Christian teachers' perspectives regarding the relationship between faith and teaching. It begins with an overview of Christian education and various approaches to answering the question of what it means to teach Christianly. Finally, the use of narratives and their importance in understanding Christian teachers and their practice is discussed.

2.1 Christian Education and Christian Schools

Christian schools approach education with a distinctive Christian ethos that acknowledges and affirms the restorative and redemptive work of God in the world through the person of Jesus Christ, as attested to by the Christian Bible (Pazmiño, 2008; Roy, 2008; Schultz, 2003). How that ethos is expressed and reflected throughout the school community depends on many things including denominational affiliations, locations, and the cultural and political contexts in which these schools operate. In addition, each Christian school is distinguished in its approach especially to teaching and learning according to what the school adopts as Christian education's end goal. The Greek word *telos* refers to an end goal, an aim,

or a fulfilment of something (Brennan, 2002); and it connotes an ultimate objective or aspiration. Given the theological and philosophical bases of Christian education, it is helpful to think of the telos of Christian education to explore various viewpoints.

For some, Christian education is about shaping of a biblical worldview that is intended then to permeate all areas of individual and community life, in the present and into the future (Plantinga, 2002; Schultz, 2003). Worldview is a way of looking at life (Harris, 2015). A Christian worldview then is a comprehensive, Christian ethos- and Bible-based framework for viewing reality (Prior, 2021); and it is often referred to simply as a biblical worldview. Biblical worldview integration as an educational telos is still the bedrock of many Christian educational approaches.

In response to what is often seen as an overemphasis on cognition in the biblical worldview integration approach, some Christian educators have begun focusing on teaching practices that attend to students' spiritual formation (D. I. Smith, 2018). Related to this focus on pedagogy is the notion that beliefs and desires are what drive individuals and that these desires can be reoriented toward Christian virtues and ideals (J. K. Smith, 2009). Transformation (Cairney, 2018; Dickens et al., 2017; Hull, 2023), flourishing (Lee et al., 2021) and deep learning (DeBoer & Cook, 2018) have likewise been highlighted in recent years as teleological pursuits in Christian education.

This list of approaches to Christian education is neither comprehensive nor exclusive; and Christian schools will often attend to more than one pursuit. Christian schools, like their counterparts in the public and independent school sectors, strive for their students' academic progress and personal and social development. However, Cairney (2018) suggests that Christian schools do so much more. Christian schools embody "education that involves the practice of fostering and generating in human beings ways of relating to God and the world in both word and action" (p. 14).

Regardless of goal, the common ground for many Christian schools is an intentional effort to reflect the Christian metanarrative and ethos in every aspect of schooling—the curricular and pedagogical framework, student development, school culture, co-curricular activities, engagement with families, staffing, etc.—such that the entire schooling endeavor is infused with Christian faith principles. *Faith-integrated teaching and learning* is a phrase often used to describe the core distinctiveness of Christian schooling (Lo, 2020; Prior, 2021); and attempts to fulfill such integration include attempts to answer the question 'what does it mean to teach Christianly?'.

The focus in this section has been on the distinctive goals of Christian education, which is often the highlight of discussions around Christian schooling. While there is recognition that the teacher is at the center of such efforts, to date, the research is sparse around the Christian teachers themselves and what and how they contribute to the goals of Christian education (Glanzer & Alleman, 2019; Prior, 2021; D. I. Smith & Smith, 2011; Witwer, 2022).

2.2 The Christian Teacher

For the purpose of this study, the term Christian teacher refers to a self-professing and self-identifying Christian who believes and upholds the basic tenets of the Christian faith and simultaneously works in the teaching profession. As such, it is assumed that they assent and willingly adhere to the Christian ethos of the Christian schools where they are employed. It is further assumed that they are professionally qualified; and like any other teachers, they dispense with their obligations and responsibilities to the highest standards required by their profession.

2.2.1 The Self Who Teaches

The concept of quality teaching has been a growing focus of global interest in the last two decades (Towers et al., 2023). Despite the lack of a comprehensive definition for this

concept, there remains a commitment and aspiration toward quality teaching in education systems around the world (Cochran-Smith, 2021); as reflected in education policy, reforms and initiatives in teacher development (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Gore, 2014; Gore et al., 2017; Hollins, 2011). Simultaneously, *teacher* quality and *teaching* quality are increasingly being treated as interrelated yet distinct concepts (Ball & Forzani, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011); "with the former generally being taken to mean teacher characteristics, qualifications, or attributes and the latter generally defined more in terms of practice *or* [sic] in terms of effectiveness" (Cochran-Smith, 2021, p. 424). However, rather than mere interrelatedness between these two concepts, Palmer (2017) suggested a prepotency of teacher quality such that "good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). In this study, quality teaching in the Christian school context refers to teaching that makes possible the outcomes of a Christian education as discussed above (Buchanan, 2020; Roy, 2008). How a teacher's identity and integrity might influence her quality of teaching warrants further discussion.

Despite the extensive interest and research in teacher identity in the recent past, a comprehensive definition of the construct remains elusive (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Clarke, 2018). Hong and Cross Francis (2020) nevertheless suggested a generally accepted conceptualization of teacher identity as "teachers' understanding of themselves as teachers, an understanding that has been shaped through ongoing processes of interpretation and re-interpretation of personal and professional experiences embedded in multi-layered social contexts" (p. 208). Among other things, teacher identity has been researched with regards to its importance in teacher development and professionalism (Alsup, 2018; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Sachs, 2005); its role in teacher self-efficacy, well-being and motivation (Adler et al., 2007, 2015; Low et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2007); and its importance as a consideration in education reform and policy (I. Goodson, 1998; Kelchtermans, 2017).

Teacher identity is now more readily acknowledged in the literature as a composite of teachers' personal and professional lives (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020; Ross & Chan, 2016). Related to this, researchers have also recognized that the affective dimensions of teaching are just as important as the cognitive dimensions (Kelchtermans, 2017). This blurring of boundaries between personal and professional and objective and subjective has not always been the prevailing approach. Still today, especially when it comes to discussing faith and education, there is an underlying inclination towards privatizing teachers' faith perspectives (aspects of their personal identity); such that the influence of their Christian identity on their professional practice remains largely unexplored (Cooling, 2010; Glanzer & Alleman, 2019; Roy, 2013), sometimes even by the teachers themselves.

A study conducted with higher education faculty in the United States of America (U.S.A.), found that the teachers' Christian faith "animated" (Glanzer & Alleman, 2019, p. 42) the worldview framework from which they taught, the content and curriculum of their subjects, their pedagogy, and their own motivations for teachings. Further, another USA study amongst K-12 teachers revealed a stronger influence of faith on course content than on instructional strategy (Witwer, 2022). However, a similar study amongst Christian higher education faculty in Indonesia yielded different results. Lo (2020) concluded that Indonesian teachers could clearly illustrate how being a Christian reflected in their comportment (being) as faculty in their various contexts. However, the influence of their Christian identity on their pedagogy (doing) and their subject matter (knowing) were much harder to trace; something the Indonesians teachers themselves recognized. In Australia, another study found that a general understanding of and tacit assent to the importance of biblical worldview integration across all aspects of their teaching did not necessarily translate into teachers' practices in the classroom (Prior, 2021).

These recent studies of Christian teachers' perspectives, especially in higher education, revealed that there is an articulated conviction and understanding among practitioners that one's (personal) Christian identity cannot be extricated from their professional identity (Glanzer & Alleman, 2019; Lo, 2020). Many have written in support of the claim that a teacher's faith orientation can and should influence their practice; and even suggested ways that this influence might be reflected in the classroom (Cairney, 2018; Cooling, 2010; Murison & Benson, 2018; Palmer, 2017; Pazmiño, 2008; Plantinga, 2002; D. I. Smith, 2018; D. I. Smith & Smith, 2011). At the same time, the question of how to teach Christianly—a question that is perhaps better phrased as 'how does a Christian teacher teach?'—remains a challenge (Lo, 2020; Prior, 2021).

2.2.2 Integrated Lives

In reference to pedagogy of Christian teachers in faith-based higher education institutions, Glanzer and Alleman (2019) used the phrase "identity-informed teaching" (p. 152), espousing first and foremost an awareness and honesty about the identity from which one teaches. These authors refer to a teachers' multiple identities, personal (or non-professional) and professional, being in concert with each other in the teaching endeavor; even though at any given time and depending on the context, one identity may be more prominent than another. Palmer (2017) drew the concept of teacher identity into a more compact construct. He defines teacher identity as "an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self" (p. 13); with integrity being "the wholeness…within that that nexus" (p. 13). This image of wholeness—of a fully integrated self—suggests that a teacher's Christian identity infuses a teacher's practice in such a way that every aspect of his/her teaching is a reflection and expression of that identity. As Palmer (2017) succinctly articulated, "we teach who we are" (p. 2).

It was not the intent of this research to define Christian teacher identity or to determine the mechanism(s) by which teacher identity might influence practice. Rather, the aim was to

explore the extent to which Christian teachers recognize and articulate the connection between their self-professed Christian identity and their practice through shared narratives of their experiences. How narratives assist in this aim is the subject of the following paragraphs.

2.3 Turning to Stories

Story "is one of, if not, the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5). According to Polkinghorne (1988), narrative provides the structure not only for the telling of the experience but for ascribing significance or meaning based on the outcomes of interrelated events. They allow and give prominence to individuals' feelings, thoughts, and interpretations of their own experiences (Alexander, 2016; Chase, 2005; Jack-Malik & Kuhnke, 2020; Taylor, 2018); thus making narrative "one of our most fundamental ways of making meaning from experiences" (Thomas, 2012, p. 209).

Connelly and Clandinin (1985) referred to the teaching act as "narrative-in-action…an expression of biography and history…in a particular situation" (p. 184). Teachers lives are bound up in stories (Carter, 1993), even as we all live storied lives (Bruner, 1987; Carter, 1993; Polkinghorne, 2010; Thomas, 2012). It was through teacher narratives that Connelly and Clandinin (1985) sought to conceptualize teachers' personal practical knowledge, "the experiential, moral, emotional, embodied knowledge teachers hold and express in their classroom practices" (D. J. Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 141). They saw this knowledge as intertwined with one's identity such that the teachers' stories, speak not only of their practice but also "tell of who they are, and are becoming, as teachers" (p. 142). Narratives then are a natural way for teachers to make sense of their experiences, to articulate their identities, and to detail how these identities are expressed in their practice.

2.3.1 Narratives and Self

There are multiple ways in which narratives are used in research. In this research, the focus is on the teachers' stories as an expression of identity or self (Chase, 2005). American

theologian Hauerwas (1991) contended that one cannot possibly speak of *self* apart from narrative. Moreover, this narrative is situated within a larger narrative about God and human existence. In a similar vein, philosopher MacIntyre (2007) conceptualizes self as represented by life story, which is defined, within a broader history and tradition, by a moral framework (i.e., virtues) and in terms of an ultimate aim—*telos.* In the field of psychology, the idea that self is intertwined in the narrative is even further distilled such that the life story is the self, thus giving rise to the construct of narrative identity (McAdams, 2018).

Narrative identity is the "internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to provide his or her life with unity, purpose and meaning" (McAdams, 2015, p. 238). Narrative identity is the constructed concept of self that emerges from connecting and drawing meaning from various episodes of a person's life (McAdams & McLean, 2013) to explain "how I came to be the person I am becoming" (McAdams, 2018, p. 364). Storytelling is correlated to both the development and maintenance of self (McLean et al., 2007); such that narrative identity is both a process and an outcome in answering the questions *Who am I? Who am I becoming? What is my purpose?* (McAdams, 2019).

Like Hauerwas's (1991) and MacIntyre's (2007) conceptualizations of self in narratives, narrative identity is seen to exist in context. An individual's life experiences, which themselves occur within larger contexts of time, social relationships, and geography, are consolidated and presented in a coherent manner such that one's narrative identity is distinct and definable in relation to these contexts. The idea of a global coherence in a life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) is salient to this research as it lends insight into the connections Christian teachers may make between their concepts of self, the broader contexts in which they live and work, and the even more extensive Christian worldview upon which they base their life perspectives.

2.3.2 Making Connections

Coherence in narratives has several elements that attend to temporal, social, cultural and thematic dimensions; but they all serve to create a unity in the life story that enables meaning and sense-making (Adler et al., 2007; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Coherence is critical in narrative identity. It enables an integration of self that further facilitates making connections to master narratives (McLean et al., 2007) or *metanarratives* (Fisher, 2012; Harris, 2015; Hauerwas, 1991; MacIntyre, 2007); which comprise wider societal contexts and worldviews. In addition, coherence and themes of integrative meaning in life stories make possible further sense-making as narrated events are used to explain one's self (McLean & Syed, 2020).

The concepts of coherence and integrative meaning-making bear semblance to MacIntyre's (2007) notion of *narrative unity*:

> the virtuous self is the one who is able to narrate one's life story intelligibly in a meaningful way, aligned profoundly with a particular tradition or at least with the resources of the tradition…in order to live a completed, fulfilled, and virtuous life,… one must achieve and live out 'the narrative unity of life' with a clear telos. (as quoted in Cho, 2021, p. 74)

In arguing for a holistic view of human beings, MacIntyre's (2007) conception of a self that lives out a narrated life, lends support for the *integrated self* that a coherent narrative enables (Galliher et al., 2017; McAdams, 2019) and the *undivided self* that Palmer (2017) espouses.

Coherence and integrative themes in narratives could be further related to Dewey's (1938) notion of interaction and continuity in experiences, which are the constituent parts of a narrative. The concept of interaction in experience simply affirms that "experience does not happen in a vacuum" (p. 22). Indeed, an experience is self-defined by an individual's encounter with some other in their world, be it an object, setting, people etc. Continuity occurs when the

connection in the encounter between self and other is carried forward to impact another encounter; at which point both the self and the other have already been impacted (Dewey, 1938; English & Doddington, 2019; Hobbs, 2012). When both interaction and continuity work together, the experience is not only educative but it takes on a richness and vitality that Dewey describes as aesthetic in nature—an aesthetic experience. (Dewey, 1934, 1938; English & Doddington, 2019; Girod et al., 2003; Girod & Wong, 2002; Hobbs, 2012).

2.4 Summary

In the context of Christian education, the question of what it might mean to teach Christianly is inherently salient and necessary. Christian teachers and their understanding of the relationship between their faith and teaching is an essential piece to the puzzle of teaching Christianly. Research to date suggests that teachers understand propositionally that their faith influences their teaching. In investigating the relationship of faith and teaching, an exploration of Christian teachers' life stories and lived experiences and the meaning-making associated with these stories, provides a glimpse into the outworking of teachers' Christian identity in their classrooms. The narrative inquiry methodology and the aesthetic lens by which these stories were collected are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Design: Methodological Considerations and Methods

In this section, the research design and procedures for this study are discussed. Section 3.1 provides an overview of narrative research and the ontological and epistemological bases for engaging with teacher narratives to understand the meanings behind teacher experiences. It includes an elaboration of the narrative inquiry methodology and how it was used to fulfil the purposes stated in Section 1.3 and to answer the research questions (Section 1.4). The specific context for this study and the procedure for recruiting participants are described in Section 3.2. Participants are also introduced briefly here. In Section 3.3 data collection tools and procedures are summarized; followed in Section 3.4 by an explanation of the framework and the process used for analyzing narratives. The final section elaborates on the ethical considerations of the study.

3.1 Narrative Research: Ontological and Epistemological Concerns

Narrative in academia has its historical bases within traditions of narratology, particularly in relation to literary theory and literary criticism (Huber et al., 2013). Since the early decades of the 20th century, there has been growing interest in the use of narrative in social science research, particularly as researchers turn their focus to understanding human experience. At the core of narrative research is the exploration of an (auto)biographical articulation of a person's lived experience as situated in time and context, including people and places; as well as the significance attributed to these experiences (Caine et al., 2013; D. J. Clandinin, 2022; D.J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Thomas, 2012). Narrative researchers agree that beyond the rich descriptive articulation of life experiences, the importance of narratives lies in the meaning that the authors (narrators), as well as their audiences (including the researcher), derive from the telling and hearing/reading of these stories (Chase, 2005; Thomas, 2012). Indeed, it is this focus on meaning making, attention to narrator voice and recognition of

the temporal, spatial, and social contexts that impact these experiences, which distinguish narrative inquiry from all other forms of qualitative inquiry (Chase, 2005).

While the interest and opinion in favour of narratives as an apt gateway into understanding experience continued to grow, education stories drew increasing attention. With the use of narrative inquiry to explore and understand everything from teacher knowledge and student learning, to policy impact on schooling and the teaching profession (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Huber et al., 2013; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016), narrative inquiry research has highlighted the value of stories as a unique avenue for understanding experiences in the classroom and school contexts as perceived by teachers and students.

3.1.1 A Way of Knowing and Being

Central to interdisciplinary research pursuits is the idea that narrative is a way of knowing (Bruner, 1987; González-Monteagudo, 2011; Polkinghorne, 2007)—a way by which the meaning of experiences are articulated and reformulated through story (Caine et al., 2013; Carter, 1993; D. J. Clandinin, 2006). Such meanings, in turn, shape the realities that individuals perceive; resulting in an ongoing cycle of experience and meaning-making that are told as stories.

Ontologically, narratives are generally understood to highlight the subjective perspective of reality. Narratives reflect the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm which views reality as highly contextual, and socially constructed (Cohen et al., 2017). Epistemologically, it would follow then, that such realities from the interpretivist/constructivist frame of reference can be known through individual and group meaning-making and through the interpretation of human experiences (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). However, the complexity of understanding human experience and thinking about them narratively at that, do not allow for such simplistic paradigmatic categorizations.

Rationality (often associated with a positivist stance) is inherent in the very act and practice of storytelling (Conle, 2001). Rationality in communication can be applied when

communication participants agree that both their goals are reasonable and that mutual understanding is the overarching objective (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). Therefore, narrative inquiry can hold up against critiques of legitimacy such that "challenges to truth claims, sincerity claims and social appropriateness claims can be issued in narrative inquiry, but will prompt not argumentative, but narrative discourse" (Conle, 2001, p. 23)

Along a similar vein, the philosophical perspectives of Hauerwas (1991) and MacIntyre (2007) posit that the subjective emphasis of narrative research need not negate the concept of rational thinking, which not only allows for evaluation of truth claims but also makes engaging with narrative possible in the first place (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). MacIntyre (2007) points out the necessity of contextualizing knowledge within established (i.e. accepted as true) traditions: "Man is a story-telling animal. I can only answer the question 'what am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question of 'what story or stories do I find myself a part of?'" (p. 250). This idea is extended theologically with the suggestion from Hauerwas (1991) that individuals' narratives exist only insofar as they are situated in a reality-claim about the world and about God. Both these thinkers therefore "identify embodied tradition as the way of knowing that provides the soundest basis for truth" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 24).

3.1.2 Situating Narrative Research in Critical Realism

The tensions inherent in situating narrative research solely within the boundaries of the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm become even more pronounced in the context of faith-based education narratives. The theological premise and worldview orientation of Christian education are themselves truth claims that assert an ontological stance of an objective reality—i.e., God as truth and the Christian Bible as the basis for understanding ultimate reality. The ontological posture of critical realism (and theological critical realism in particular) alleviates that tension.

Critical realism developed out of two distinct traditions: the theology and science debate and the work (though not solely) of Roy Bhaskar (Shipway, 2010). Both theological critical

realism and Bhaskarian critical realism are underpinned by a realist philosophy of science, which posits that reality exists outside or independent of the human mind and human activity (Barrie & Shipway, 2001; Guthrie, 2019; Liston, n.d.; D. Scott & Bhaskar, 2010). Critical realism emerged as a scientific alternative to positivism and constructivism in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Fletcher, 2017; D. Scott & Bhaskar, 2010; Shipway, 2010). It acknowledges the positivist ontological stance of an objective reality but simultaneously asserts that reality does not consist simply of that which can be observed (Guthrie, 2019; D. Scott & Bhaskar, 2010).

Critical realists insist on the distinction between ontology and epistemology (Barrie & Shipway, 2001; D. Scott & Bhaskar, 2010; Shipway, 2010). To define ontology by what can be known epistemologically or by what is socially constructed (as constructivist do) is to succumb to epistemic fallacy (Barrie & Shipway, 2001; D. Scott & Bhaskar, 2010). Defining ontology in epistemological terms not only muddies the understanding of reality but also ascribes unwarranted primacy to knowledge. Nevertheless, the epistemological stance of critical realism strongly affirms the role of experience and interpretation, as this is the way that humans interact with and make meaning of reality (Shipway, 2010). This interpretation can be influenced by socio-cultural factors and may be a result of limited or flawed understanding (Fletcher, 2017). As such, it is possible to have multiple and ever-changing interpretations of reality; but not multiple realities as claimed by constructivists (Shipway, 2010). In addressing the interrelated and constantly evolving nature of knowledge in response to fresh revelations and discoveries about reality, critical realism—and theological critical realism in particular—provides a useful theoretical framework for inquiry into narrative and the concept of aesthetic understanding in Christian teacher experiences.

3.1.3 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry highlights these aspects for exploration: “what happened, the significance or meaning of that and how it is told or shared” (Thomas, 2012, p. 210). To say

however, that narrative inquiry is simply about collecting and analyzing stories would be an oversimplification. There are several principles that define and distinguish narrative inquiry from other narrative research. These include the presence of a narrative inquiry space, thinking narratively, prioritizing the relational dimension, and focusing on the significance behind lived experience.

The term narrative inquiry was first introduced into the field of education research by Clandinin and Connelly (J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). They viewed narrative "as both phenomena under study and method of study" (p. 4). Their interest is in lived experience and they rationalize the narrative exploration of these experiences by explaining that "Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19).

Inspired by Dewey's (1938) framework for thinking about experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conceptualize narrative inquiry as defined by three essential dimensions of *temporality*, *sociality*, and *place* (D. J. Clandinin et al., 2007; Huber et al., 2013). These dimensions make up the "narrative inquiry space" (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) in, through, and around which a researcher must navigate as they seek to understand the narratives of experience (Byrne, 2017). Rather than constraining or narrowing the field of inquiry, this inquiry space suggests avenues for both researcher and participant to explore; which could lead to insights about the experiences that might otherwise have been left undiscovered (Downey & Clandinin, 2010). For the novice researcher, such a structure provides helpful guidance.

Temporality acknowledges that experience occurs in a continuum with a past that influences the present; and a present which enables and impacts a future experience. This fluidity of experience suggests that people, events and places are all in a state of transition. Sociality involves both personal and social conditions. Personal conditions comprise the

affective aspects of "feelings, hope desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions of the person whether the inquirer or participant" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). The social conditions are the factors and forces surrounding the individual that establish the immediate as well as broad context of the individual (D. J. Clandinin et al., 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). This dimension underscores the idea that every story is situated within a larger familial, institutional, historical and cultural narrative (Caine et al., 2013). Finally, the dimension of place attends to the fact that all experiences occur in a particular place or series of places. The influence of these situations on the experience needs to be taken into consideration.

The importance of attending to all three dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place in any narrative inquiry cannot be overstated. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) point out that "what makes a narrative inquiry is the simultaneous exploration of all three" (p. 479). In so doing, a researcher ensures she is thinking narratively (about the story)—the gold standard for narrative inquiry—as opposed to thinking about narrative which is the purview of other qualitative research methodologies that also utilize narratives as data. In the former, narrative is a process and in the latter it is an object (Morris, 2001).

Narrative inquirers are called upon to think narratively or to be "thinking with stories" (Morris, 2001, p. 55). In the active listening and questioning, as participants share their stories and later in the interpretation of such stories, the researcher is intentionally and systematically immersed in the participant's narrative as well as their own. As such, "we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as take the radical step back…of allowing narrative to work on us" (p. 55). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) elaborate further by stating that, "in contrast to the common qualitative strategy bracketing inquirers out, narrative inquirers bracket themselves in to [sic] an inquiry" (p. 480). In this immersion into narrative, the researcher-participant relationship takes on prominence.

Narrative inquiry has been referred to as relational research (Caine et al., 2013; D. J. Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Jack-Malik & Kuhnke, 2020). This view highlights a researcher's commitment to engaging with participants and their stories with mutuality in purpose, authenticity, and vulnerability; such that both researcher and participant grow and learn (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). "We are complicit in the world we study" (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61), which means "we are visible with our own lived and told stories" (p. 62). There is inherent recognition that both inquirer and participant(s) enter the interaction with their own histories and backgrounds and that the interaction not only influences the stories they tell but changes both the inquirer and the participant as well. This relational dimension also extends to the readers and the research community. Both need to be dutifully considered, especially as the study transitions from working with field texts to handling the data as research text; but the relational commitment between inquirer and participants remains the priority throughout (Caine et al., 2013; D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; D. J. Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Huber et al., 2013). It is worth noting that this relationship between researcher and participant is considered to impact the social context of the study and is therefore part of the sociality dimension that ought to be considered (D. J. Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

3.1.4 Applying Narrative Inquiry

The primary interest of this study are the experiences of teachers in Christian schools. Because "it is through story that people are able to understand, make meaning of, and relate experiences" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 576), narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology to adopt for this study. The intention is to explore teachers' various narratives pertaining to their own background and current practice; that is stories of their experiences as learners, their journey towards becoming a teacher, and their experiences being a teacher in a Christian school.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) suggest that designing a narrative inquiry begins with imagining a "multi-dimensional life space" (p. 481) where the inquiry phenomena, topics, participants, and research questions are all taking place. "To plan a narrative inquiry is to plan to be self-consciously aware of everything happening within that space" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 481). Clandinin et al. (2007) further clarify that this involves consideration for the context and method of data collection which can occur through a multitude of tools as well artifacts or records (data). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to such records as field texts because they are representations of experience in the field which are created by participants (both author/narrator and researcher). The narrative itself may be oral or written and it can be about a particular event, a significant aspect of a person's life or their entire life story (Chase, 2005). Field texts may include: "teacher stories; autobiographical writing; journal writing; field notes; letters; conversations; research interviews; family stories; documents; photographs; memory boxes and other personal-family-social artefacts; and life experience" (p. 93).

While interviews are a natural and convenient means of eliciting participant stories in narrative inquiry, visual methods have been increasingly used in combination with interviews so that such narratives are more effectively drawn out and explored. In the last decade for example, there has been a resurgence of interest in the use of photo-elicitation (Shaw, 2013), a technique that combines photographs in the interview process to facilitate participant reflection (Kyololo et al., 2023) often metaphorical in nature (Beech, 2018). The photovoice method has a similar focus on photos but involves participants themselves taking photographs "that highlight their lived experience relevant to the topic of the project" (Anderson et al., 2023, p. 2). These photographs and the ensuing discussions about them facilitate rich narratives around a research topic (Anderson et al., 2023; Kellock, 2011). Card-sorting, using cards with pictures or words to facilitate storytelling (Brent et al., 2021) and sandboxing,

creating scenes in a sandbox using miniature figures and objects to tell a story (Mannay et al., 2017) are other creative variations of visual methods. All such methods utilise visual stimuli to encourage participants to engage more deeply with their own stories and facilitate storytelling . More importantly, in detracting from the researcher focused dynamics of interviews (even semi-structured), visual methods allow the participants voices and initiatives/enterprise/personal contexts are foregrounded (Anderson et al., 2023; Brent et al., 2021; Kellock, 2011; Kyololo et al., 2023; Mannay et al., 2017). Some attempt was made in this research project to harness some of the promise of visual methods by encouraging participants to bring photos or items to support their stories. However, time constraints meant these visual aids were neither prominent nor the focus of the discussion in the time spent with the participants.

In the interest of thinking narratively throughout the process of inquiry, the three dimensions of narrative inquiry space (i.e., temporality, sociality, and place) provided inconspicuous checkpoints to guide the discussion in each interview session. They needed to be inconspicuous precisely because they were merely meant to help the researcher further explore participant narratives; and these dimensions suggested areas where the researcher might continue to inquire and where participants might make connections and draw out meaning from their experiences (D. J. Clandinin et al., 2007). The interview prompts (See Table 3.1) reflected these dimensions unobtrusively so that participants could freely choose not only what stories they told but how much they revealed in the process.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

Participants in this study were teachers working at the Ananeo Christian School[1], a moderately- sized K-12 school in Australia. Ananeo has close to 600 students and the equivalent of about 40 full-time teaching staff. It was chosen specifically because it is

[1] The names of the school, participants, and students in this text are all pseudonyms.

representative of the Christian school sector that is the broader context for this research project.

Ananeo Christian School aspires toward faith-integrated teaching and learning, and all staff are oriented into the school community with this in mind. Newly appointed teachers are allocated peer support colleagues for the first year of employment and obtain a Certificate of Authentic Christian Education after completing a specific orientation program. Extensive professional development opportunities particularly around Christian education are provided for all staff throughout the school year. Furthermore, several staff members regularly participate in teaching, learning, and leadership conferences. The school actively promotes graduate studies at the National Institute for Christian Education (NICE) and encourages and supports staff who decide to undertake further studies with NICE. Choosing participants from within this same context delimited to some extent the factors that influenced their narratives and provided some insight into the role that context played in the meanings they derived from their experiences.

Given the depth and time involved in narrative inquiry, the maximum number of participants for the study was set at four. Only two criteria were initially established to guide the selection process: years of teaching experience and the year level they taught. Kelchtermans (1993) suggested that a teacher's "professional development can only be understood properly if it is conceived of as a result in a lifelong process of learning and development" (p. 443). As the teachers' perspectives on what it means to teach Christianly was a key focus area in this study, it initially seemed appropriate to select teachers who had worked a sufficient amount of time in the Christian school context to develop such a perspective. However, limiting participants only to veteran teachers presumes such a perspective is predominantly developed from time spent working in a Christian school, which may or may not be the case. Therefore, the goal was to have both beginning (0-3 years' experience) and more experienced (over 3 years' experience) teachers

in the participant pool. Furthermore, a combination of teachers from both the primary and secondary divisions were also preferred. The work of Hobbs and Kelly (2016) on an aesthetic analysis of the relationship between teacher knowledge, identity and passion was specific to science as a subject area. Having both generalist and subject area specialist views in this study (as represented by primary and secondary teachers respectively) was expected to offer other perspectives to address the secondary research questions of this research.

A request for participation was sent via email to all teaching staff by the Teaching and Learning Coordinator, with the approval and endorsement of the principal of Ananeo Christian School. Staff were given one week to respond. In the end, only four teachers expressed interest in participating in the study; so, the selection criteria were set aside and all interested parties were included in the study. Interested staff, were provided with additional information about the study and asked to sign consent forms. The final participant pool included Elise, Gabe, Jane, Tanya, representing 7 to 18 years of teaching in middle school and high school years at Ananeo Christian School.

Elise has been teaching for eight years but was only recently employed full-time at Ananeo Christian School. Although trained for middle school teaching, her previous employment saw her teaching primary years. At Ananeo, she has done both middle and high school teaching and enjoys teaching those years equally. Gabe has been teaching for seven years and has only ever been employed by Ananeo. He teaches mathematics, science, and technology subjects predominantly in the secondary school. He has also served as faculty coordinator for mathematics. Jane is in her tenth year at Ananeo but was employed as a teacher in other contexts before coming to this school. She teaches high school English primarily but is also heavily involved in career and vocational counselling and leadership roles in the school. Tanya has been teaching for nearly 26 years and has been at Ananeo for 18 of those years. She has an even longer association with the school, having spent her senior

school years here as a student. She has taught a variety of subjects in middle and high school including physical education, history, English, Bible, geography, and psychology. The stories of all four participants are presented in Chapter 4.

3.3 Data Collection

The primary method for collecting data in this study was semi-structured interviews. Participants, prompted by key questions, were encouraged to tell stories from three phases of their lives: as learners, pre-teaching career, and as teachers. Teachers were also invited to bring along to the interviews any artifacts (e.g., personal pictures, favorite quotes, journal entries) that they deemed relevant to the telling of their stories. The semi-structured interview questions (Table 3.1) were used to guide the discussion in what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as privileging the researcher's intentions. However, the questions were broad enough to allow participants to decide what stories to tell and in what manner to tell them—a situation where participants' intentions are foregrounded. The aim was to engage dialogically so that the story, just as often occurs in natural contexts between narrator and listener, became a conversation between the researcher and the participant.

When it was time for the third interview, the school year had ended and the participants had begun their school holidays. Participants were given the choice of another video call or corresponding via email for the final interaction. All of them chose the latter. While email correspondence limited the dialogic element, it did not detract from the data gathered as most of the intended topic for the third interview (i.e. the impact of reading and telling their stories) emerged naturally in the first and second interviews and was thoroughly discussed by the participants at that time. Their email responses in the third interaction simply reinforced what they had already disclosed in the previous interviews.

Although it was originally thought that conducting interviews outside school premises would provide a more conducive venue for informal and personal storytelling, the nature of

the participants' school day responsibilities made that impossible. Instead, the first set of interviews were conducted in an unoccupied school administrator's office. The space was flanked on one side by a glass wall that made obvious to passers-by who was being interviewed. I had initial concerns that this would make participants uncomfortable and impact the interview, however, none of the participants appeared concerned and were deeply engrossed in their storytelling from the moment the office door was shut.

As meaning and significance emerge from the telling and retelling of these stories (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the collection of field texts occurred over a series of three interview sessions spread over three months. The first session was conducted face-to-face on school grounds as described above. The second session was done virtually using Microsoft Teams and the final interaction was through email correspondence. A transcript of each interview was provided to each of the respective participants in between the sessions and their experience of reading through the transcript was reflected upon in the following session. Such reflections were included as field text (Caine et al., 2013).

In narrative inquiry, field texts can comprise a range of things. Apart from the typical journals and other written or spoken records, other memorabilia can not only trigger memories of experiences but in themselves can be the point of reference for stories told and retold (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Attending to such items "might be called an archeology of memory and meaning" (p. 114). Participants in this study were encouraged to bring any such items to the sessions and to tell the stories related to each one. Gabe brought pictures of a lighthouse and a boat replica which were significant metaphors in his journey through teaching. Jane brought a favorite children's book about an unusual teacher. It was one of the few books she kept from her childhood. Tanya sent me images of notes and letters of affection and appreciation from her students, samples of missives accumulated over the

years. She has kept them all and brings them out every so often. On particularly difficult days, “I reread them and remind myself why God put me here”, she said.

Seasoned narrative inquirers advise researchers to maintain an open mind and an observant stance toward unexpected items, events, interactions that may provide other surprising but rich insight into the research puzzle. This approach constitutes a bracketing into narratives that enables researchers to immerse themselves into the participants stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). While data collection tools in this study initially comprised only interviews and artifacts, I was able to observe first-hand the interaction between Jane, a former student, and his parent. It happened at a chance meeting in a shopping center close to the school. That interaction and Jane’s reflection about it (discussed in the next chapters) provided further insight into her relationship with her students and the motivations that drive her teaching.

Table 3.1

Guiding Interview Questions

Session	Questions
Session #1	a. Tell me stories you remember from your years as a student—stories of your learning journey. b. Describe your journey into the teaching profession. c. How did you end up teaching in a Christian school?
Session #2	a. What was the experience of reading through the transcript of your interview like? b. Tell me stories of successful seasons or moments of teaching? c. Since becoming a teacher what specific experiences have reinforced your commitment to remain a teacher and/or continue teaching in a Christian school context?
Session #3	a. How would you describe the experience of narrating your stories throughout this research project? b. How would you describe the experience of retelling or recapping your stories in each succeeding session? c. How would you describe the overall experience of reading through the interview transcripts?

3.4 Analyzing Teacher Narratives: An Aesthetic Perspective

There are a wide range of approaches to analyzing narratives. Each approach is dependent on the paradigmatic underpinnings of the narrative research (Hunter, 2010; Riessman, 2008; Thomas, 2012) and the resulting understanding about the nature of narratives and the role and responsibilities of the researcher in representing and interpreting the participants' stories (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). The ethical implications of this will be further explored in the next section. In this section, the discussion about analysis procedures centers specifically around the goal of narrative inquiry which is to discover meanings behind

experiences in the stories that are told and retold (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Meaning is not inherent in an experience. It emerges as the narrative is told, not from the story but from the act of narrating itself. In their work on narrative and learning, Goodson et al. (2010) suggested a similar dynamic in learning from narratives as "narrative learning is not simply learning from the stories we tell about lives and ourselves. It is learning that happens 'in' and 'through' the narration" (p. 2). Inasmuch as this study focuses on stories about the shaping of Christian teachers' self-concept and the resulting influence on their practice, Dewey's (1934) concept of aesthetic experience helps frame a way of exploring the experiences that teachers highlight.

Aesthetic experiences describe a process by which individuals search for and discover meaning and develop dispositions to continue that search (English & Doddington, 2019). The meanings derived from these experiences reflect an aesthetic understanding which is "a rich network of conceptual knowledge combined with a deep appreciation for the beauty and power of ideas that literally transform one's experiences and perceptions of the world" (Girod et al., 2003, p. 577). Aesthetic understanding is the basis for the analytical framework for exploring narratives in this study.

3.4.1 Aesthetic Understanding

Aesthetic understanding is a conceptualization of learning that engages both cognitive and affective dimensions. Teaching for aesthetic understanding has the capacity to transform perspectives, ignite passions, and provide cohesion in people's stories (Girod et al., 2003; Girod & Wong, 2002; Hobbs & Kelly, 2016; Pugh et al., 2020). Aesthetic understanding has three distinctive qualities. It is dramatic and compelling, unifying, and transforming (Girod & Wong, 2002). All three qualities are a result of an aesthetic experience and render an experience significant and produce deep learning (Pugh & Girod, 2007).

The dramatic and compelling nature of aesthetic experiences highlights individuals' heightened emotional engagement with ideas that can lead to changes in perspectives about self and the world. "It is almost like a light switching on inside of us that adds clarity to our thoughts and understandings" (Kelly, 2013, p. 174). It is a capturing of the imagination that impacts not just the learner's current context but creates anticipation and excitement for possibilities in other contexts and in future experiences. Aesthetic understanding is therefore aptly described as "a jumping-off point that compels people to learn more" (Girod & Wong, 2002, p. 206). The connections one makes to their wider context through aesthetic experience brings unity and coherence to their understanding so that

> what exits aesthetic experience is a more rich, multifaceted understanding that incorporates conceptual knowledge, skills, dispositions, feelings, attitudes, actions, and emotions and value. The goal of learning should be having aesthetic experiences, coming to aesthetic understanding and developing value for ideas beyond the purely instrumental. (Girod & Wong, 2002)

While aesthetic understanding was originally conceptualized as a pedagogical framework particularly for teaching and learning science (Girod et al., 2003; Girod & Wong, 2002; Pugh & Girod, 2007), Hobbs and Kelly (2016) explored its application to teachers in the context of their learning to become science educators. They contended that aesthetic understanding provides insight into the ways that teachers' experiences and engagement with their subject areas affect their self-concept and their passions in teaching. Given that this study on Christian teachers focuses on how their experiences shape their self-concept and practice for teaching Christianly, an aesthetic lens as operationalized by Hobbs and Kelly (2016) provided an appropriate and useful tool for exploring and analyzing Christian teacher narratives.

3.4.2 Applying the Aesthetic Lens

Aesthetic experiences are those that bring about a strong cognitive and affective response and result in aesthetic understanding. In their analysis of experiences of science educators Hobbs, (2012) and Kelly (2013) have elaborated on the three interconnected elements of aesthetic understanding (Girod et al., 2003; Girod & Wong, 2002; Pugh & Girod, 2007) and related them to their resulting influence on the educators' knowledge, identity, and passion. The resulting KIP (knowledge, identity, and passion) analytic framework (Hobbs & Kelly, 2016) foregrounds the influence of aesthetic experiences on knowledge, identity, and passion as reflective of the aesthetic understanding that ensues.

Understanding that is compelling and dramatic in nature evokes highly charged emotions that can spark imagination and accentuate passion. Passion, as described by Day (2004), encompasses a teacher's enthusiasm for their subject, care for the students, courage and motivation to teach, and the moral and intellectual fervor to support all this. This passion is simultaneously impacted by aesthetic understanding that expands a teacher's knowledge so that new connections with other ideas are made. This in turn creates a unified and more coherent knowledge base that inspires further exploration and learning about the subject. Aesthetic understanding is further reflected as a transformation in the way teachers perceive themselves (i.e. identity) in relation to their subject and their contexts (Hobbs & Kelly, 2016). The circular interaction between knowledge, identity, and passion reflects the integrated nature of aesthetic understanding so that while the relationship between all three aspects can be traced, causation is not easily determined.

According to Hobbs (2012), adopting an aesthetic framework to explore teachers' experiences is premised on the idea that teaching, like learning, involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. Furthermore, good and effective teachers have aesthetic qualities about them that include but also exceed the technical skills and content knowledge of teaching. These

attributes and qualities "are a mixture of the personal and the professional; they are committed, creative, critical, purposive, knowledgeable professionals. Ethical, moral, and spiritual values inform and colour their expertise" (Skilbeck et al., 2004, p. iv).

While Hobbs and Kelly (2016) have developed the KIP framework specifically with the experience of science educators in mind, in this study, it has been applied to the experience of Christian teaching. Knowledge in the case of this study pertains to teacher understanding of what it means to teach Christianly and the distinctives of Christian education. The aesthetic dimensions of unity and coherence have been reflected in any connections the teachers have made in their narratives to their faith journey and worldview (Hauerwas, 1991). Identity and perspective transformation are expressed as an outcome of new meanings or of the process of formation that has taken place in their experiences as a teacher (Mudge, 2022; Palmer, 2017; D. I. Smith, 2018). Finally, passion was related to enthusiasms and commitments that come with identifying teaching as a spiritual calling or vocation (Cooling, 2008); a perspective that is ultimately dramatic and compelling in its own right. Teachers' stories of expanding knowledge, transformation of identity or self-concept, and (re)ignited passion as outworked in their teaching practice have directly informed the main question in this study.

The KIP framework differentiates two research 'moments' where experiences might produce aesthetic understanding. The first moment addresses the immediate impact of an aesthetic experience. The second moment attends to Dewey's (1934) notion of continuity—the idea that an experience impacts not just the present but also what and how individuals engage with future experience—and looks at the journey of the individual following an aesthetic experience. Hobbs and Kelly (2016) further suggested questions (Table 3.3) for each of the moments to facilitate analysis of the transcribed narratives.

Although transcripts were not coded strictly according to either the notion of moments or the questions related to each of the moments, thinking in terms of moments helped frame the

story prompts used in data gathering. Meanwhile, the questions related to Kelly s and Kelly's (2016) moments were used during coding to identify key expressions and changes related to participants' passions, understanding (knowledge), and self-concept (identity). Furthermore, these questions worked as cues signifying aesthetic understanding had taken place in the narrative. This in turn made identification of aesthetic experiences much easier, especially when participants did not distinguish or highlight these experiences themselves during narration.

NVIVO, a qualitative analysis software, was utilised to code the narratives. The main codes used and their descriptions are listed in Table 3.4. It is significant to note that multiple codes could often be applied to particular portions of the text. For example, a participant expressing a greater understanding about the role of the Christian teacher in the classroom was coded under *knowledge* because it represented the participant's expanding knowledge about teaching Christianly. It was also coded under *identity* because of what was expressed about their self-concept; and under *passion* because it revealed an expressed a commitment toward that new understanding. Because changes in *knowledge, identity,* or *passion* were indicative of *aesthetic understanding* having taken place, it was coded as such as well.

Table 3.2

[redacted]

Note: From "The heart of the educator: Aesthetic experience shaping knowledge, identity, and passion" by L. Hobbs and L. Kelly, 2016, *Exploring emotions, aesthetics and wellbeing in science education research, 13,* page 61. Copyright 2017 by Springer International Publishing.

Table 3.3

Key Terms Used in NVIVO for Coding Transcripts

Code	Description
Knowledge	References to learning, study, curiosities, discoveries, and shifts in perspectives or expanding understanding
Identity	References to roles they have assumed, personal and professional aspects about themselves; particularly when changes to self-concept occur
Passion	Expressions of deep commitment, hopes and goals for their students and themselves as teachers; and other expressions of enthusiasm or moral and intellectual fervour
Aesthetic understanding	Involves statements where new knowledge or understanding is expressed; where transformation in self-concept is articulated or implied; or when passions are discovered or stimulated.
Aesthetic experience	Specific experiences that have significant influence and impact on participants' understanding/knowledge, their self-concept/identity, and their passions
Coherence	References that illustrate a participant is making connections between past and present experiences; and articulating the influence of both on possibilities for the future. Also refers to moments, when they articulate how their experiences connect to narratives of their families, personal and professional communities, and to the Christian metanarratives and worldview
Faith references	Explicit references to God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Christian Bible, their church/faith community, faith practices (e.g., worship, prayers, etc.); or references to 'spiritual' experiences

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The ethic of care is paramount in working with individuals who have willingly shared their stories with the researcher. Ethic of care in this study translated not only into faithfulness in representing these stories so that the integrity of the story is not compromised (D. J. Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Riessman, 2008); but also in conveying the meanings that the participants themselves have ascribed to their experiences. It also included a responsibility to fully disclose the meanings that may have been revealed through interpretation, of which participants may not have been previously aware (Polkinghorne, 2007). Furthermore, because the act of narrating itself can impact the storyteller, the ethic of care in this study extended to thinking about the effect of the study on the participants even after the interviews were concluded (Polkinghorne, 2010). The last research sub-question guiding this study was included partly to provide participants with the opportunity to debrief their experience of telling their stories and to reflect on ways that the interview process might have affected them.

Narrative inquiry is relational research (D. J. Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Downey & Clandinin, 2010; Ntinda, 2020). A focus on relationship is a distinctive feature in this methodology and involves the participants, the researcher, the audience, and the community in which the study is located. Between the participants and the researcher, this was reflected in the transparency with which the research process was conducted; and through efforts at continuous verification that ensured accurate representation and mutual respect for both participant and researcher voice occurred. Between the researcher and the readers, relationship was expressed as the researcher offered readers the possibility of vicarious experience (Polkinghorne, 2010) and aesthetic understanding as readers engaged with the narratives which were presented as research text (Tracy, 2010). This endeavour involved the researcher's commitment to interpretation to "deepen the reader's understanding of the meaning conveyed in a story" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 483). Finally, with respect to community, attention to relationship entailed this researcher's

commitment to careful, rigorous and ethical principles to produce research that contributes to the field of education (D. J. Clandinin & Murphy, 2009).

The guidelines for ethical research, which also include protecting anonymity, obtaining informed consent, and adhering to institutional obligations of both Griffith University and the school where the participants are employed, were addressed through the ethical clearance process [GU Ref No: 2022/523] and maintained through the course of the project. However, keeping both care and relationship as overarching principles extended the concern for ethical practice beyond conventional bounds as illustrated above.

3.6 Summary

Narrative inquiry provides a way of exploring the meaning and significance that individuals ascribe to experiences and highlights the impact of these meanings on other experiences. Particularly significant and formative experiences have an aesthetic quality to them. Analyzing teachers' experiences with an aesthetic lens foregrounds the influence of any experience on their passions, views of self, and knowledge. Narrative inquiry as the methodology in this study was therefore enhanced using an aesthetic lens, as the researcher engaged with the stories of the four teachers from Ananeo Christian School. Summaries of the participants' stories follow in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Telling their Stories

Data in narrative inquiry research comprises "biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (Chase, 2005, p. 651). Presenting findings that facilitate later discussion requires first presenting participants' stories. These stories represent each one's journey as a learner, path into teaching, and experiences and growth as teachers. They highlight the development of participants' content and pedagogical knowledge; their passion for their subject areas and/or for teaching; and the transformation of their self-concept and identity throughout their careers.

While each participant's story is unique, their shared context at the Ananeo Christian School provides a glimpse into both the similar and the diverse meanings that each teacher has ascribed to their experiences at the school. Their stories are presented here in order of length of service at the school — from the most recent appointment (Elise) to the longest serving (Tanya). All of the participants, except for Gabe, have had experience teaching in other schools. While the comparisons they mentioned in the interviews between teaching at Ananeo and at other schools are not foregrounded in the summaries, they are nevertheless noteworthy for the impact these experiences would have had on the teachers' overall perspectives.

4.1 Elise

Elise took up a teaching degree immediately after high school. She has vivid recollections of both very enriching and very hurtful experiences with teachers growing up (especially in middle and high school years). These experiences have shaped her "approach to teaching" and are the very basis of her identity as a teacher. She teaches with a relational perspective and an ethos of care permeates all her narratives of interaction with students—a direct consequence of positive interactions with her own teachers growing up.

> I loved teachers that loved their students and had a heart for teaching…when they [teachers] just had your best interest at heart and didn't primarily just want to get work out of you, that they actually saw beyond that. I definitely put that into my teaching … I really just want students to know that I care about them and that I even if they don't have a safe place, that school's a safe place.

She also recalls a particularly painful experience with her teacher in primary school, who berated and shamed her over an incident. This was a recurrent reference in her narrative, which likely meant it was an even more formative experience than she realized. It explains her almost fierce insistence on her students' well-being and welfare "… it still gets me teary, so I'm like, I don't want a student to feel like that in say Year 7 and feel that way for the rest of their life when they mention it. How terrible would that be?" So, she constantly wonders, "how are my students? ... are they happy? ... are they ok at home? ... are they ok at school?" Even in recounting examples of successful teaching in the classroom, she highlights students' feelings of validation and recognition as key factors in their participation and engagement.

> I not had only students that were quite engaged in my class, but also were willing to do lots of discussions…they had some really good ideas…it might not have necessarily been about what the lesson was, [but] they may have gone on a tangent, but then where we ended up was really fascinating. I think they could also sense that from me that I was really engaged. And so they kept going because their ideas were being heard. And I was also very enthusiastic about them.

Elise's relational approach to teaching is clearly framed by her experiences as a learner. In like manner, her pedagogical approach is also a clear outcome of experiences and passions as a learner, and her own personal propensities—aspects of herself that she became more aware of when she became a teacher. She considers her young age an advantage as she can easily relate to the interests and hobbies of her students and find common ground with

her own hobbies—an experience that "felt like home." She provides her senior students with more choices in their learning activities because of her university experience.

> I really enjoyed the uni environment. I liked the flexibility of it. And that's what I like bringing into teaching…a bit more flexibility…a bit more freedom to choose how they tackle their learning and how they do assignments

She recognized that her passion and enjoyment for humanities subjects, influenced by her father's own interest in history and an outstanding history teacher in her high school, could be contagious: "… now the students will be encouraged and really enjoy it [subject] because I'm really enjoying it and I really love it and therefore, they would bounce off me." Several times, Elise mentioned her love of learning (she once accepted out-of-field teaching assignments just for the joy of learning something new). Because she relishes the whole learning experience herself, she desires for her students to experience the same.

> I just really love giving the students that feeling that I got when I was younger, the 'aha' moments…going through everything and making sure that they understand what is being taught to them and trying to come at it in a different way if they don't.

This job at Ananeo Christian School is not Elise's first posting at an independent Christian school. Her previous experience was in a school under another Christian denomination (the same one that oversaw her high school), where she was required to get additional certification in religious education. It was a straightforward experience learning "different things that you might teach depending on what sort of denomination the school that you're in adheres to." But there was nothing particularly cathartic about the experience, "I think that's about it for that one, <laugh>." Perhaps on account of this experience, her understanding of developing as a Christian teacher relates primarily to expanding worldview or content knowledge.

> I've found that it's been pretty good to have open discussions with students about things when it comes to society and how society views certain things as opposed to how the Bible views different things or the same things … I would love to explore that a bit more and actually have a deeper understanding of not just right and wrong, but grey areas.

During her years in teacher training, Elise completed her practicums in public schools. It was her first exposure to the public system as she had only ever attended private Christian schools. Her recollection of her experience revealed a belief that from a purely academic and pedagogical standpoint, teaching and learning in a Christian school is not distinctive: "Everyone's still learning. Everyone's still going through the system and learning things and having the light bulb moments… and it was still teaching and learning." Nevertheless, Elise recognizes that Christian schools have a different goal particularly with regards to the development of students. Elise sees the formational goal of Christian education as the teacher's responsibility; and it is achieved in large part through caring for her students but also in the way she represents herself as a Christian to her students and to God. In this, her teaching is a reflection of her faith journey. Ultimately, her desire to be a good teacher is also a desire to please God.

> When I'm teaching, I'm also reflecting God. And I need to be aware that how students perceive me as a Christian teacher is how they may perceive what Christians in general are like, as well as what God's people are like … making sure that the way I'm showing God to others is the way that He would want me to show him to them. I'm always trying to reflect on myself as a child of God. I hope that being a teacher I'm teaching well, and that God is proud to call me his child and that I'm not only instilling these values and things in myself, but to others as well.

4.2. Gabe

Gabe's love for mathematics cannot be contained. His entire demeanor lit up as he talked about fractals and infinity problems. It's a love that his parents helped foster at an early age, alongside a love of learning.

> I remember this beautiful sunny day in Poland--you get a limited sunny days in Poland … there were some kids playing outside our home while… I was inside working on a times table computer program that my dad had written for me… I would basically just do problems. I would time how quickly I did them.

Despite being an excellent student, his learning journey was marked by periods of demotivation as a teen and almost debilitating anxiety as a university student. Nevertheless, he persevered through a double major in mathematics and computer science at university; with a focus on computer systems engineering. He worked as a computer programmer immediately after graduating. However, work circumstances soon had him thinking of a career change.

He had been leading youth group at church for some time. This experience coupled with his penchant for all things academic made him conclude, "Teaching is more the of the way for me to go." It was not so much a revelation as it was a strategic decision. In the last few months before completing a teaching degree, Gabe was informed of an opening at a local Christian school for a digital technologies teacher. He is now on his eighth year teaching at this school.

Gabe narrated his development as a Christian teacher along two distinct and consecutive lines: firstly through his understanding of the role, function, and expectations of teachers generally and secondly through his understanding of what Christian teaching entailed. His first year of teaching was a challenge. His experiences in the classroom conflicted with what he considered good teaching. He explained, "sometimes it might be a

plan for a lesson didn't work out as I planned it to, or maybe I didn't deal with a behavioral issue like I should have or let a situation get out of hand."

His perceived lack of pedagogical knowledge and skill in classroom management eroded his confidence so much that he labelled himself "the worst teacher in the world". He struggled also to define his identity as a teacher vis-à-vis his relationship with students, some of whom had attended the youth group which Gabe had led. Recalling those first years, Gabe struggled in the interview to articulate the difference between being a youth leader and teacher.

> In teaching, I think I found that you're no longer trying to just be their friend. You're maybe more trying to be a coach. I had to realize that I can still build relationships with the students because relationship, that's the core of teaching also. But I still had to have high expectations of them, and I still had to call them to account on things, I came to realize that as a teacher, you're a counsellor, a teacher … you are sometimes a mentor, sometimes there are so many different roles I think you have from a teaching perspective.

In both these areas of struggle — teacher practice and teacher identity — Gabe 's passion for working with young people kept emerging in his narrative. He spoke of entering the profession with a desire to mentor and support students. This desire to have a positive impact on his students made his perceived inadequacies as a beginning teacher more discouraging. He felt "like the students didn't learn like they should have--that I've failed the students."

When a seasoned teacher and leader in the school, commended Gabe as "probably the best first year teacher he had ever seen", Gabe could not have been more surprised. As encouraging as this was, however, an unexpected embrace after an end-of-year assembly

from one of his students had the most profound impact on Gabe; even more because he had thought this student was disinterested and disengaged.

> … it's still probably one of the highlights of my teaching career because it helped me to see that those little moments of care that you try to give, whether the smile or the extra effort trying to get this person to pass even though they don't want to, it matters to the person, and it's seen even if they look like a brick wall for the whole year. So that was a really special moment and [it] helped me to be more confident [that], 'This is where I'm meant to be.'

It was notable that this interaction, which proved to be a turning point for Gabe, was in the realm of his passion: relating well and supporting teens. While he was struggling with teacher identity and teacher practice, his passion got little of his attention. Yet it was in the affirmation of his passion (through this student) that he found confidence and motivation. In the years following, Gabe noticed 'improvements' in his teaching, pedagogically and with classroom management. His also gained greater clarity with respect to teacher identity as distinct from his youth leader identity.

At this time, Gabe also started to realize that his understanding about Christian teaching was limited. "I think, the thing that's taken me the longest time to learn, is what Christian teaching is." Despite the regular professional development provided by the school on Christian education, Gabe confessed that he "never fully grasped it". He understood and thoroughly enjoyed the biblical worldview elements he was learning but "had no idea what they're talking about when they are talking about it [worldview] and teaching … I just couldn't put the threads together". He was growing in his knowledge of worldview principles (content) as well as in understanding the role and function of the teacher, but he simply could not connect the two. "How do we actually teach mathematics from a biblical point of view? Maybe there was just not a maths example. I feel like it's easy in humanities maybe."

Starting his graduate studies at the National Institute of Christian Education (NICE) was another turning point for Gabe. Whereas before he was so focused on content and pedagogy that was distinctive to Christian teaching, at NICE he started to look at the purpose behind Christian education. “I understand more where we are aiming at … the goal and so it is helping me understand about the journey that needs to be taken to get there.”

There is an aesthetic quality to the way he described his newfound understanding, particularly “… as that passage in the Bible says, if the rocks were to cry out God’s praise, [then] the beauty of mathematics can, and the wonder of mathematics can.” This was further amplified as he described listening to a podcast by another mathematics teacher: “… the way she spoke about it was just beautiful … what if the main purpose that we're learning mathematics is to worship God and love God and love neighbor?”

While Gabe does not explicitly articulate an impact of this insight on his own passion for mathematics or of a change in his perception of self, the eagerness in his storytelling indicates that passion for his subject has been reignited and his identity has been influenced. Knowledge, passion, and identity coalesced and his faith and teaching intersected as he declared, “I love mathematics and I love to share that excitement for mathematics with the students. I love faith, I love God and I love helping students to see or get a passion for that.”

In the first interview, Gabe brought a picture of a lighthouse to accompany his narrative of a spiritual experience that occurred even before he started teaching. In that experience, looking at a particular lighthouse in the distance …

> I felt God speak to me at that point that He's called me to be a lighthouse. I guess I feel like it's a life journey working out exactly what that means, but I do, through different moments in teaching … see[ing] more of what that means … having the privilege of being a lighthouse to so many students … a non-anxious presence to the students that I have the privilege of teaching or the staff around me.

Some of the most poignant experiences in his seven years of teaching pertain to instances when both students and colleagues have affirmed Gabe in his role. These experiences have continued to transform his sense of self and confidence and to validate his overarching passion for impacting students.

> I think we can easily have non-realistic views of ourselves and not experience ourselves in the same way other people maybe experience us. And so, for me, those kinds of experiences, they helped me to see the impact that I have on students and staff … that encouragement has given me the confidence to be more authentic, to be more myself … and just move in the areas that God's gifted me in.

Gabe spoke of a sense of "peace and blessing" in his current role; and of the job itself being a confirmation of being where "I'm called to at the moment." Participating in the study and reflecting on his story not only validated his role ("what I am doing") but also his identity ("who I am").

> it is a blessing to be able to look back and see God's faithfulness… see his hand at all different sort of points of life. I think remembering all these things, does affirm me and what I'm doing more

Most importantly, there was a sense of connection to a bigger narrative and expectation of developing into "… who God is calling me to be."

4.3 Jane

Jane was the first person in her extended family to attend university. Despite the challenges of university studies, Jane thoroughly enjoyed her chosen field and graduated with an honors degree in psychology. She recalled having drifted from her faith during her university years. In the year immediately following graduation, however, a series of events led to a renewal of her faith journey and a keen sense of "wanting to follow God's call". She initially described the decision to undertake a teaching degree as a matter of practicality.

> I'd always had this sense of… trying to match my vocation with what my husband's would be. If my husband had gone straight into pastoral ministry when he finished his studies, I had this sense we would be going interstate or into the country…and that my teaching qualification would align well with that and I'd be able to get a job wherever.

In the second interview, she clarified that there was deeper inspiration for that decision, one that entailed a sense of calling.

> Teaching was something that I always felt was in me, and there had been moments in my life as a teenager, where people had really encouraged me for the impact and the influence that I had on young people. I suppose it was somewhere in my mind, just working out that God could use me just as effectively as a teacher as he could if I was leading worship.

Jane calls her teaching career an "uncommon journey" not only in the fact that she didn't take up teaching directly after high school, but also because it took 10 years from completion of her teaching qualification for her to teach in a "traditional setting". Jane divided her teaching career into two distinct phases the non-traditional and the traditional. In her first ten years, she was involved in vocational education: teaching vocation and education training (VET) courses and facilitating the VET program for several schools in the city. It wasn't until she got a job at a Catholic school that she considered her job as officially teaching.

It was curious to me that Jane would maintain the dichotomy, so I asked her why she felt she needed to describe her career in this way. The question surprised her at first, but she later explained that she felt she needed to cater to people's understanding of what constituted "genuine" teaching experience—that sometimes the understanding of "real teaching is roll books, yard duty, hats, and [proper] socks" (i.e., the psycho-social and logistical infrastructure that we associate with schooling). However, she was quick to add that she

understood teaching very differently. Even in those first years of her career, she "was actually helping students to learn about themselves and facilitating learning, which is what I am still doing now."

That brief interaction in the interview gave me a glimpse of the tension that Jane experiences on a regular basis around the common understanding of what schooling entails. Jane recounted an incident involving a student. Ruth, who had significant personal challenges, had arrived at school wearing a hodgepodge of uniform items, loosely put together.

> Two other members of staff went straight to, 'What's going on? Why are you wearing this?' I was a bit bold and I just stepped right in between and I said [to Ruth], 'I'm so glad that you made it to school. I actually don't care what you are wearing.' The fact that she was at school was far more important to me than what she was wearing… that's where my experience of my non-traditional teaching life, I think, has created this foundation for me that I'm never going to be able to separate myself from. There's a revelation!

Perhaps, even as very young child Jane had some inkling that she would think differently about teaching. During the second interview, she brought in the children's book *The Wonderful School* by May Justus. It's a story of kindergarten teacher, Ms. Tillie O'Toole, who "taught all her lessons in riddles and rhyme." She was a teacher who was anything but conventional. It was one of the few books Jane had kept from her childhood. Even as a child, she was drawn to the atypical Ms. Tillie O'Toole.

Jane observed that a lot of time is wasted in schools focusing on what she terms "external" matters. While she admitted to having to train herself to pay attention to such things in order to fulfill her teaching responsibilities at this school, she realized that she will "always have a different perspective on the value of education … because I've experienced it

in a very different way to many of my colleagues." It is a perspective made possible by her time teaching in non-traditional settings and she saw it as being divinely orchestrated for a distinct purpose: "to be the teacher that God has created me to be and the person that I need to be for the students that he's put me in front of, I needed to take a different trajectory to get here."

I was able to observe what she meant by "the teacher God created me to be" in the afternoon after the first interview. Jane was officially my host for the day at the school and we were in the shopping center getting dinner. While there, we ran into a former student, Lachlan, and his mother. I listened intently as both mother and son, told Jane about Lachlan's approaching final exams — the last of his university studies. They excitedly reported on all the opportunities that had opened up to him and the success he was enjoying. Jane beamed at the news. Later in the car, she explained to me the struggle that school had been for Lachlan and the efforts of the staff to help not just Lachlan but also his mother cope with the challenges. To hear that Lachlan had continued "to have confidence as a learner" beyond his time at the school was life-giving and inspirational to Jane.

There were many other such stories, like the one of Kayla, who had landed a prestigious job in the beauty industry because she had been encouraged as a high school student to pursue her interests in this field. Then there was Joshua, seemingly unfocused and aimless in school, who two years after graduating wrote an email to Jane that was longer than any assignment he had submitted to her at school. He had found a job. He wrote, "There was no way that you could have told me what it was, Mrs. Ames, but I found it, and it's just for me, and I love how I get to do this."

Before these students left school, they would have heard Jane say, "Officially, I'm not your career counsellor when you finish school, but if you ever find yourself so stuck that you don't know what to do, please don't continue being stuck if it means me meeting you for a

coffee." It is perhaps this assurance of a personal commitment and unwavering desire to see them succeed and flourish that draws Jane's students back to her long after they've left high school. There was a delight in the way Jane shared these stories of students flourishing. I could sense these stories were precious to Jane not so much because they affirmed who she is and what she does as a teacher but because they are the fulfilment of a deep hope that she has for all her students: that they might grow and discover a sense purpose, even if it means pushing them out of their comfort zone.

She credited both her experiences as young learner and her time at Ananeo Christian School for this perspective and understanding. She could trace the worldview orientation that frames this perspective and recognized this as a distinct expression of teaching Christianly. At the same time her stories reflected an understanding that teaching Christianly does not stop at content or pedagogical knowledge. It must produce a holistic perspective that fuses knowing, being, and doing for both teacher and student.

She illustrated this with another story of having to make some curriculum related decisions regarding a Bible class. With limited time to complete a module on the topic of *the church*, Jane decided to focus on the outworking of the content rather than on the information. As a class they had earlier decided to raise funds to contribute to the work of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation. So, in devoting the class time to their fundraising project, she informed the class that instead of learning about the church they were "choosing to *be* the church". To me, she clarified her objective: "if I'm not helping them to actively engage with *the Word* [Christian Bible] in a way that they're applying [it] in their own lives, then I'm actually not teaching Christianly." This desire to help students connect their narratives to the Christian metanarrative is ultimately how Jane describes the point of Christian education, which is

> understanding more deeply what God's actual plan and purpose is for us, and that it's the same plan for everybody, the same overall blueprint for everybody, in terms of our purpose is to bring restoration to God's broken world through the gifts and talents that he has given to us … if we're doing something, and that something is making someone's life better, then we are fulfilling our purpose.

It is a hope that she applies with equal fervor to her own growth and development as a person (which includes her teacher self) even as she continues to exercise her passion to see students be known for who they are not what they know; and helping them be purposeful in their learning.

> being a teacher gives me a chance to actually help other people not have such a bad experience at school…I'll say to my students, I said, "I want you to have the opportunity to grow in your skills and not be bound by what your teachers think of you, what you think of yourself, what your parents think." … that's part of my motivation, I think.

In her new role as teaching and learning coordinator, she also saw a converging of all her life experiences, interests, talents, learning, and passions to help both students and teachers thrive at Ananeo. It is as much a professional goal as it is a statement of faith as she reflected, "… nothing in my life has been wasted by God, [that] everything serves a purpose in me … fulfilling what He's told me to do."

4.4 Tanya

Tanya has had a long history with Ananeo Christian School: first as a senior high school student then for two separate stints as a teacher. She has been teaching at the school for a total of 18 years. Her stories reveal a sense of joy and purpose in her role at the school that belie her reluctant journey into teaching. She finds a kindred spirit in Jonah, the biblical prophet whose rejection of God's directive landed him in the belly of a whale. "I just feel like

God called me into teaching and I just kept running away … every time I went towards teaching, the doors opened for me quite easily. And every time I tried to go away from teaching, life got hard."

Tanya got accepted into an education degree at university immediately after high school. She cried when she found out. Being a teacher was the last thing she wanted to do. She reasoned, "Everyone hates teachers. Why would I want everyone to hate me?" She viewed teachers as authoritarian figures; a view that was irreconcilable, she thought, with her empathetic nature. Despite her initial reaction however, she finished her education degree and took a job at a Christian school. Her time there only reinforced the idea that her personality was ill-suited for the teaching profession. She was miserable so she left. She spent the next several months trying her hand at different jobs—none related to teaching. Eventually, however, the novelty ran out.

For practical reasons, she returned to teaching as a relief teacher at Ananeo Christian School. She remembered having a good experience at this school as a student, so she was willing to give relief work a chance in that environment. It wasn't long before she was offered a full-time position in the middle school. She didn't consider herself trained in that area, but she was told, "You're the kind of personality we want for middle schooling … we'll train you if you're willing to do it. We just want your personality." Her personality—the one thing that she thought made her ill-matched for teaching—was the very thing they considered critical for the role. She accepted the post if only because she was out of excuses. "I literally went, 'Okay God, fine. If this is what you want me to do, fine. I wasn't even gracious or thankful about it, which I should have been." Six months later, her outlook had completely changed.

> … it wasn't teaching that was wrong for me. I just wasn't in the right place yet. I felt like I'd come home when I came here. I remember saying to God … 'Thank you for not giving up on me and finding a place where I can be.'

While this was not Tanya's first employment with a Christian school, it was at Ananeo Christian School that she was first challenged to think about Christian education:

> I'd sort of learned how to attach a Bible verse to a lesson and make me feel justified that it was worth teaching. But I think it was really when she [her mentor] kept saying to me, "But why? But why?" As much as that can be a frustrating question, it's also a life-giving one because when you start to realize the *why*, why you're doing it, why you're teaching about cells or why you're teaching at the structure of an essay, it gives it more meaning.

Still, there was a deeper rationale for pursuing what this all meant. She enjoyed learning about worldviews and its implications for teaching, but it was the idea of the hidden curriculum—what is implicitly taught through teacher modelling, attitude, and practices rather than what is explicit in the content, that really motivated her. She concluded, "… who you are matters … the understanding of who you are is the bit that makes the difference." She continued to explain that a teacher's identity is a "driving force" in the hidden curriculum:

> … I realized that if I didn't immerse myself in why we do this, then the hidden curriculum the kids would get would be, "Well, she's just tacking it [Christian perspective] on because she has to, because that's part of her job and she's getting paid." And I didn't want that to be the message that I was sending. So, I spent a lot of time studying …

Tanya completed a graduate degree in Christian education at NICE. Then she did a second master's degree in counselling, because she found herself repeatedly approached by students with disclosures of mental health issues. "I didn't understand it ... but I decided if

God trusted me with them that I had to do something responsible." It was initially a matter of personal faithfulness to the calling; but she soon found out it was also a passion area.

Every aspect of Tanya's teacher story is infused with her faith journey. She recalled moments in the classroom when she could sense "the Holy Spirit welling up" inside her to present a different perspective or to give a response that visibly impacted students. She called them moments of "connectedness with the class. It's a feeling that between me, them, and God, we're seeing something more than just the classroom." She was quick to add that these experiences are not so much mystical in nature as they are an outworking of God in her life and expressions of her authentic self. She credits even her creative ideas, which colleagues often comment on, to God.

Tanya values authenticity and is not above apologizing to her students when necessary. "I've done it many times … I think showing them that you respect them like that and that I'm not a big authoritarian person, then they trust you with the other stuff." Authenticity is a trait she remembered appreciating in her favorite teacher in high school—a teacher who she deliberately tried to provoke, with questions about faith especially. This teacher remained unperturbed, which so impressed Tanya that she concluded: "I want to be like that … and because of the way she treated me, I felt like I wanted to learn. I don't know how to explain that, but because she was so caring, loving, and patient, I was like, I feel like I can do this."

Along similar lines, she is always keen to acknowledge students for who they are, beyond the grades and the academic performance. It is the mark of good teaching, according to Tanya to "meet students where they're at and appreciate them for who they were created to be, rather than having an expectation that they should be here or there at this level." So, at the beginning of the school year when a young student introduced himself to the class and immediately followed with the admission "I have dyslexia", Tanya saw it as opportunity. She

said, “Well, that's okay. Tom Holland has dyslexia, and he's Spiderman, so it can't be a bad thing.” Others in the class, who up to that point had listened in uncomfortable silence, erupted with excitement. The young student beamed.

“I believe in you.” This is the message Tanya has constantly tried to communicate to her students. It is the message that struggling Year 11 student Shelly heard when she realized Tanya had been applying a higher-level rubric to her assessment task instead of the lower-level criteria by which she was used to being evaluated. Shelly was in disbelief, "So I'm on the one [rubric] like everyone else?” It was motivation enough to see Shelly through the assessment.

“I believe in you.” This is the same message that seemingly disengaged and unmotivated senior student Mike heard when Tanya suggested a multi-modal presentation as an alternative pathway for his course requirements. Tanya celebrated his success, “I was so excited he went up a whole band level purely by changing and looking at what he's good at rather than what we want him to do.” Then, empowered to work from his strengths and interest, Mike would later come up with another unusual but brilliant project for another class. For both Shelly and Mike, as with all her students, Tanya had academic excellence in mind but “making sure they are showing excellence [according] to their ability is important.” Far more than just sound pedagogical strategy for Tanya, this outlook reflects the deep hope she has for God’s perspective about each student to be foregrounded:

> they [students] have to have the knowledge that regardless of whether they get that ‘A’ or regardless of whether they go on and become a doctor or something else, that God loves them implicitly, and they are so important.

In the school year immediately following our interviews, apart from teaching Year 12 psychology and PE classes, as well as middle school science, Tanya took on a new role as Pedagogy Coordinator. All her experiences, interests, and passion areas have converged. She

saw it as “God at work” not just in her life but in the life of the school; as others too have stepped into roles that are fit for purpose. So, although Tanya was sharing her story, there was a keen awareness through it all that hers was just one of many that

> fits in a bigger plan that he [God] has for the school. It's not all about [you], and I kind of like that that it’s not all about [you], because it makes me feel like I'm part of something bigger and better.

4.5 Summary

These stories were distilled from two interviews with each participant. The participants were asked to narrate their life experiences as a learner, before becoming a teacher, and as a teacher. More than just chronological accounts, the coherence and unity in each of their stories reflect the meaning and sense-making that each participant was engaged in, even in the act of telling their stories. How their stories have shaped their understandings, passions, and identity constitute findings in this study; and will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: What Teachers' Stories Reveal

Although participants were aware that their stories were the focal point in this study, no prompts for their storytelling were provided in advance. The desire for unprepared and unedited stories was an effort to capture their sense- and meaning-making processes at work. It was anticipated that the stories that emerged would present participants' perspectives about the relationship of their faith to their teaching, not as abstract propositions, but as already enacted and experienced realities. These in turn would give broader and richer insight not just into participants' perspectives but also into the experiences that shaped them.

In this chapter, the dominant themes that pertain directly to participants' perceptions of the faith and teaching connection are elaborated. In the first section, the invigorated passions, expanded knowledge, and shaped identities that emerged are highlighted as the impact of aesthetic experiences on each participant and their understanding of their practice are traced. The second section is an elaboration on the nature of narratives and the insights that emerged as participants engaged coherently with their own stories. The impact of the storytelling act on participants as narrators is also discussed.

5.1 Looking Through an Aesthetic Lens

Teaching involves a complex combination of knowledge, skills, perspectives, attitudes, actions, and feelings that are a result of the teacher's lived experience whether formal or informal up to that point (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Girod & Wong, 2002). This shaping is not a product of merely mundane events in teachers' lives but of the truly life-changing experiences that are etched in their memories and emerge in their stories. These ultimately formative experiences, which Dewey (1934) characterized as aesthetic, are the starting point of analysis.

5.1.1 Aesthetic Experience and the KIP Framework

The knowledge-identity-passion (KIP) framework developed by Hobbs and Kelly (2016) was applied to the teachers' narratives in this study to highlight the shaping of their perspectives, dispositions, and practice in Christian teaching. This framework is premised on the understanding that certain experiences are so aesthetic and compelling in nature that they have a profound impact on individuals. The aesthetic understanding that ensues can transform their perception of self and the world around them, stir passions, and compel individuals to seek even greater understanding. Hobbs and Kelly (2016) distinguished between aesthetic experiences, whose impact is almost immediately perceived (Moment 1), and the aesthetic experiences that form a foundation for layers of further experiences, that eventually lead to transformation that occurs much later (Moment 2). Moment 2 type experiences encompass childhood experiences whose impact on the individual may not be recognized or realized until years later. To attend to Moment 1 and Moment 2 type experiences, the participants were asked to tell the stories of three distinct periods in their lives: their younger years as students and learners, the years that led directly into teaching, and the years spent developing as teachers.

In attempting to understand the aesthetic experiences, including spiritual experiences, that have shaped teachers' perspectives, it seemed sensible to begin the analysis by identifying the aesthetic experiences in their narratives. Yet for several reasons that exercise proved to be more difficult than anticipated. First, when teachers were asked to tell their stories, it was inevitable that the stories that would surface in their extemporaneous storytelling were ones that they considered noteworthy. There were a few times in the interviews when participants were moved to tears at the recollection of an experience. It was evidence that the stories being relayed were not a mere recounting of historical events but rather expressions of deeply moving experiences that could elicit a visceral response despite

the passage of time. Consequently, every event or relationship they elaborated on presented itself as a potential aesthetic experience.

Clearly the emotional impact of the experience was not a sufficient criterion to identify which experiences could be aptly classified as aesthetic. So, I started to look further at evidence of aesthetic understanding which meant looking beyond experiences that seemed to move the participants to those that resulted in a change in perception of self and the world around them, and/or a compulsion to investigate further. Therein lay the second reason that identifying aesthetic experience in the teachers' narratives was so challenging. I intentionally avoided telling the participants what I was looking for in their stories (i.e., the life shaping aesthetic experiences); so as not to unduly influence what they chose to share. Without explicit guidelines, their narratives were naturally expressed as *stream of consciousness* storytelling that only loosely followed a sequential timeline. This also meant that the consequent impact of each of their experiences was not immediately described or connected to the story at hand. Although that was to be expected, it nonetheless made identifying aesthetic experiences challenging. In that challenge, however, I realized there was something to be gleaned about how participants attributed significance to an experience.

It was evident in their storytelling that participants were not always fully aware of the impact that an event or series of events had on their perspectives. Such was the case when Jane declared, "There's a revelation!" [Jane, 1st interview], after telling me that her background in non-traditional schooling had forever changed the way she would teach in the traditional setting. It was in the storytelling that the full impact of her early teaching life became apparent. At other times, participants would readily identify how an experience in the past had either shaped or confirmed their current dispositions, passions, and perspectives. However, they also confirmed that this realization had happened long after the experience occurred—consistent with Hobbs and Kelly's (2016) characterization of *Moment 2* types of

aesthetic experience; and usually came as a result of intentional reflection. Gabe, for instance, recalled an early penchant for mathematics. However, it wasn't until much later that he would recognize this as a passion for the subject area—one through which his love for God could likewise be expressed. Similarly, Elise had vivid recollections of notable encounters with teachers when she was a student, although she admits the impact of these encounters on her teaching came much later.

> Definitely as I've become a teacher and gone into the education sphere of things, there's things that I've realized about myself and then also people around me that I had not realized until I became a teacher, until I had that background I suppose. [Elise, 1st interview]

For all these reasons, I found that the most effective and efficient way to distinguish the aesthetic experiences in participants' stories was to work backwards; looking first at points in the stories when a passion or commitment was expressed, where a realization about self was articulated, or where new learning was identified. When these influences in passion, identity and knowledge occurred in their stories, I could then look for the ways in which the participants themselves connected these outcomes to previous experiences; or look for these connections myself when they were not explicitly articulated. In this exercise, not only was the shaping influence of the aesthetic experience more conspicuous, but the participants' understanding of the ensuing changes in passion, identity and knowledge were even more discernible. The effect was akin to spotlights shining on each other so that the source and the outcome were visible to one observing from the sidelines.

The use of the KIP framework was useful for exploring the commitments of teachers to their role and their craft because it is the transformations that take place in the dimensions of knowledge, identity and passion that are characteristic of aesthetic understanding and thereby applicable to investigating how teachers learn to become teachers (Hobbs & Kelly,

2016). As the intent of the study was to highlight the knowledge, identity, and passion that frame a Christian teacher's understanding of the relationship between their faith and their teaching, it is to these three elements that we now turn. In Hobbs and Kelly's (2016) model, the three dimensions are expected to exert influence and effect change in each other; although it is not always evident which dimension initiates the transformation. In their stories, the participants could most easily articulate an area of passion. So, in the following paragraphs I discuss passion first because passion statements were the most accessible in their stories and emerged very early in their narratives. However, the order in which I address the three dimensions of the KIP framework does not imply causation.

5.1.2 Passion

A key imperative in narrative inquiry is attention to contextual aspects of the storytelling event (D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, I especially noted the participants' enthusiastic participation and engagement in this study, from beginning to end. I had earlier planned to conduct the study at another school but after months without a response to the request for volunteers, I was forced to relocate the study to Ananeo Christian School. Within three days of the invitation going out to staff at Ananeo, I had all the volunteers I needed. All of them eager to share their journeys as teachers. This enthusiasm spilled over into the interviews as teachers shared their stories openly and willingly, constrained only by the school timetable that saw them rushing off to yard duty or their next class. Given that the interviews took place in the final term of the school year, their energy and eagerness was all the more surprising. Through their stories, I would later recognize this keenness as a reflection of what can only be described as a kind of delight that they experienced in and about their roles and their workplace—an aesthetic expression in itself.

Passion for a subject or an activity seemed inherent to each person, like Gabe's love for and aptitude in mathematics or Elise's relishing the "aha moments" in her learning. There

was an aesthetic quality to the way teachers shared about their passions, those things that moved them or motivated a particular pursuit, disposition, or trajectory; even when it wasn't directly related to teaching. These inherent passions could be discovered, stirred afresh, or sparked toward more creative pursuits and broader understanding (Girod & Wong, 2002). For the participants, this happened sometimes through encounters with past teachers, peers, and students. Such was the case with Tanya who was so captivated by her high school teacher's demeanor and authenticity that she would later make it a professional goal to be likewise with her students. At other times, invigoration of latent passions occurred through new learnings and knowledge gained. For instance, Gabe who confessed to being initially mystified about the relationship between teaching mathematics and Christian worldview orientations would, after multiple learning experiences, talk fervently about the idea of worshipping God through mathematics and seek earnestly to pass that fervor on to his students.

Through their stories, all four participants articulated a deep desire to inspire, encourage, and facilitate the well-being, growth, and learning of their students. While none of them outrightly labelled this expressed passion as a case of their faith influencing their teaching, all of them related this desire and focus to a sense of responsibility toward God: a matter of obedience and faithfulness. For Gabe, Tanya, and Jane, however, there was another dimension to this deep hope for student learning and well-being. This was reflected in their teaching practice as consistent attempts to highlight matters of faith and the Christian worldview in relation to the subject they were teaching; and more importantly to make these relationships relevant and accessible to the students.

Drawing on Darby's (2009) work, Hobbs and Kelly (2016) discussed two imperatives that impact teacher practice. The first was a *pedagogical imperative* "where a teacher's passion for their students drives learning" (p. 73), much like the dedication expressed by all participants. The second was *personal imperative,* where a teacher's passion for the subject,

in this case matters of faith, drives student learning; as reflected particularly in the practice of Gabe, Tanya and Jane. I noted that these three teachers had been at the Ananeo the longest and all had had opportunity to work with a particular teacher mentor who consistently challenged them to reflect on the distinctives and the purpose of Christian education. Tanya and Jane subsequently completed graduate studies in Christian education at NICE where biblical worldview integration was a focus. Gabe is in the process of completing the same program.

Although participants could easily express their passion for their students, their subjects, and in some cases their deep desire to frame their subject by faith perspectives (i.e., Christian worldview), teacher passion for teaching itself was harder to identify. The vocational nature of teaching expounded in Christian education literature has often been related to the idea of teaching as a calling (Cooling, 2008; Palmer, 2017; J. K. Smith, 2009; van Vuuren, 2017). Though it was not the intention of this study to explore teachers' perspectives on vocation, much less to understand their sense of being *called* to the profession, the concept of vocation and calling was an area that could naturally lead to teachers relating their faith to their teaching. Furthermore, van Vuuren (2017) suggests that people, who have a religious orientation and those who identify with a particular occupation (e.g., medical practitioners, educators, etc.), are likely to mention the idea of *calling* in discussing their work motivations or passions. I had anticipated this to be borne out in their narratives, especially as participants discussed their passions. However, I found their articulation of 'being called' more understated than expected, especially in regards to their initial foray into teaching.

Lemke (2020) defines calling as a "perspective on life and work that emphasizes the ongoing invitation by God to participate in his purposes and is motivated by a desire to serve God and others" (p. 303). The idea of serving God and others in their teaching certainly

emerged in the participants' stories. However, none of the participants articulated a clear sense of being invited by God to do so specifically through teaching. Even with respect to their decision to become teachers, none described a sense of being called; or related an "initial calling experience" (p. 315) to the teaching profession. Rather, most undertook a teaching degree as a fallback alternative, a second choice, or as a strategic measure. In Tanya's case, teaching had even seemed like a burdensome responsibility, one she tried to escape.

Nevertheless, the pleasure, satisfaction, and purposefulness that the participants experienced in their roles at the school now were apparent. Gabe and Elise conveyed a sense of being exactly where they should be. Tanya saw her role as being part of a God-ordained bigger story. Jane understood her role at the school as a convergence of all her life experiences so that she might be "the teacher God created me [her] to be." This sense of purpose, commitment and fulfilment are consistent with callings that are lived out or enacted (Lemke, 2020), regardless of how the concept of calling was articulated or recognized. More importantly, such motivations have the potential to stimulate further efforts at growth and development as teachers and encourage changes in how teachers perceive themselves—their self-concept—in their roles.

5.1.3 Identity

The aesthetic understanding that emerges from aesthetic experiences can have a transformational impact on identity and self-concept (Dewey, 1934; Girod & Wong, 2002; Hobbs & Kelly, 2016). Transformation, an inner change in perspective and disposition that leads to outward change in action, is a basic teaching of the Christian faith (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20). It is considered evidence of being rightly related to God (Harris, 2015) and confirms that growth and maturation as Christians are occurring. Understandably, transformation through

teaching and learning is an expressed goal of Christian education (Cairney, 2018; Murison & Benson, 2018; Roy, 2008; J. K. Smith, 2009). Despite the biblical understanding that the inner transformation of an individual is the work of the Holy Spirit (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, John 16:13; Galatians 5:22-23), the role of teachers in facilitating the context in which transformation might take place is significant (Cairney, 2018; D. I. Smith, 2018; J. K. Smith, 2009). Moreover, the transformation of the teacher—how they view themselves, their lives, their work, their students, and their subject—is equally important in the pursuit of transformational education (Keast, 2022; Ojha, 2018; Palmer, 2017). Although transformative education is not the focus of the study, the concept provides a framework for exploring how teachers' growth and maturation in their faith journey and the resulting transformations that they experience relate to their practice of teaching.

There were many moments of change in self-concept through each of the participants' individual narratives; but across the majority of their stories, transformation in identity was prominent in two significant periods of their journeys. The first period related to their initial engagement with the teaching profession and the second period related to their ongoing development as Christian teachers. It was mentioned in the previous section that none of the participants were particularly inclined to pursue teaching careers to begin with. Even Elise, who among the participants was the earliest in her journey to realize that she wanted to teach, had initially wanted to pursue English studies in university. This hesitation or lack of enthusiasm to become a teacher was in large part because of preconceived notions about who teachers were and what teachers ought to be like—i.e., participants' (mis)understanding of what constituted teachers' professional identity. Because of these notions, Elise did not think she would enjoy teaching and was surprised during her practicum teaching experience to find that she not only enjoyed being in the classroom but that she was, in fact, capable of teaching well.

For the others, these preconceptions about teacher identity would prove to be a challenge even after they started teaching. In Gabe's case it was a lack of clarity about the difference between being a youth leader and a teacher that saw him flounder in the classroom. For Tanya it was the impression that teachers were intensely disliked by students because they were viewed as authoritarian figures. She reasoned, "Why would I want to be that person that nobody liked?" For both, these preconceptions led to the conclusion that they were either unsuited for the profession or lacked the skill to be successful at teaching. Jane likewise had a preconceived idea of what teaching should look like or at least what was expected of teachers. It led her to label her early professional experiences as "non-traditional" in an effort to validate her teaching experience and somehow qualify the incongruence between her own motivations and priorities and the expectations of the school regarding the role of teachers.

Such struggles in their early teaching years lie in stark contrast to the current sense of confidence and contentment that all the participants expressed concerning the roles they were in at the time of the interview and the ones they were about to undertake. The participants spoke emphatically about a sense of being exactly where they should be and doing what they should be doing. Lemke (2020) refers to this as expressions of "lived calling" (p. 312), which are reflective of passions but also reveal a sense of their core identity being purposefully lived out.

A transformation in their perception of self and the teacher role had clearly taken place over time; as multiple experiences were interpreted and reinterpreted resulting in current conceptions of teacher identity that were different from their initial notions (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020; McLean et al., 2007). The aesthetic framework suggests that although all the participants' experiences would have been subjected to a process of interpretation and reinterpretation, it is those experiences that are aesthetic in nature that are most capable of

bringing about transformation in identity as perceptions are shifted and imagination is inspired (Dewey, 1934; Girod et al., 2003; Pugh & Girod, 2007). One such aesthetic experience occurred for Elise during her student teaching days.

> I found that when I was doing my pracs [practicum] … as I kept doing it, I felt like I was improving and getting better and that I was good at it. And then that's where it really hit me that I felt like I could be…not just a teacher but a good teacher as well.

Students in her practicum classes told her they wanted her back the next year and practicum teachers (i.e., supervisors) congratulated her for the sessions she taught. Elise understood these events as affirmations of her *calling*, "God kept encouraging me that it was something that I was put here for."

The aesthetic experience that initially transformed Gabe's self-concept as a teacher similarly happened during the early days of his teaching. Discouraged by his perceived inability to manage his classes and execute lessons according to plan, Gabe had labelled himself "the worst teacher in the world". Hearing that a respected and seasoned colleague was very impressed with Gabe as a new teacher instigated a shift in Gabe's self-perception. However, it was an unexpected acknowledgement and show of appreciation from one of his seemingly disengaged students that set him on the path toward a new narrative about his teaching—a transformed teacher identity. "It's still probably one of the highlights of my teaching career…That was a really a special moment and I think some of those things helped me to be more confident about, 'This is where I'm meant to be.'".

The second momentous transformation in identity that occurred across participants' stories related to their understanding of what teaching as a Christian looks like. "When I'm teaching, I'm also reflecting God", said Elise [2nd interview]. Far beyond an enjoyment and a sense of self-efficacy that characterized her initial foray into teaching, Elise highlighted her current responsibility as a Christian teacher to represent God and model the Christian faith

journey well. Harris (2015) suggests this notion of representation in relating faith to work, is an appropriate starting point as "we approach our employment as an invitation to be God's incarnated representatives in a specific setting" (p. 202). However, the goal of such representation goes quite beyond the idea of simply modelling to "a view of work as participation in the *missio Dei*—the mission of God in the world"(Harris, 2015, p. 209). That 'mission' involves an ongoing participation in the transformation and restoration of people and the world to their original good design (Harris, 2015; Middleton, 2014). This is a basic theological principle that so infused Jane's articulation of her teacher identity as she acknowledged that she has been uniquely created "to bring restoration to God's broken world…" [2nd interview]. Helping her students understand that they, too, have a purpose of making someone's life better, is the hallmark of who Jane is and what she stands for as a teacher.

Tanya's identity transformation was along similar lines. Whereas she was content in the past to simply attach a Bible passage to a lesson and call that teaching Christianly, Tanya now paid special attention to the hidden curriculum—the teaching and learning that takes place more as a result of how she teaches and how she relates to her students rather than what content she sets out to teach. Tanya understood the significance of hidden curriculum to be grounded on her Christian teacher identity "…who you are matters…[it] is the bit that makes the difference." She went on to explain that without her full immersion in the role of the Christian teacher and the purposes of Christian teaching, her students would experience the Christian worldview as an *add-on* [emphasis added] element to their learning rather than as an all-encompassing and animating basis for their learning and living. This all-encompassing nature of the Christian worldview in education was also reflected in Gabe's developing understanding of mathematics as an expression of worship of God. The resulting transformation in his identity from a lover of mathematics to a lover of God through

mathematics also produced a cohesive and integrated teaching objective: to evoke in his students a passion for both mathematics and God.

It was notable that for Gabe, Tanya and Jane, the transformation in their identity was largely driven by engagement with post graduate studies at NICE. Their studies expanded their knowledge base and challenged and kindled their imagination and passions for what else might be possible pedagogically throughout their roles as Christian teachers. This effect on their self-concept is consistent with the findings of Beech (2018) in her inquiry into the impact of the NICE graduate course in Christian education on teachers undertaking the course. She concluded that "these graduates … actually *see themselves differently* as a result of having completed these studies" (p. 39).

It is worth mentioning again in relation to the development of self-concept, that Gabe, Tanya, and Jane were all encouraged and supported early in their employment with the school by the same teacher mentor. Not only did this mentor consistently challenge them to explore their own motivations and understanding of teaching Christianly, but she helped identify their areas of strength, which she encouraged them to develop. Jane explained "in her role back then [she] recognized my willingness and eagerness to learn, and she would send me off to all kinds of different things." The outcome of these participants' engagement with a teacher mentor coincides with Netolicky's (2016) assertion that participating in school-based coaching is an "identity-shaping experience" (p. 81). Furthermore, Girod and Wong (2002) contended that transformation in identity allowed individuals to imagine other possibilities. Not surprisingly, both Tanya and Jane continued learning beyond the post-graduate studies at NICE. Tanya went on to earn a master's degree in social work to continue engaging with mental health challenges of students at the school. Jane continues to engage with authors and thinkers, learning through informal study for now, with a strong interest in pursuing doctoral studies in the future.

There were other identifiable moments of transformation in the participants' self-concept. Each time these changes could be traced back to an aesthetic experience or experiences; some of which might be called transcendent or spiritual in nature. Gabe recalled a cathartic moment during a time of personal reflection when a lighthouse in the distance became a metaphor for his identity and eventually for his teaching.

> I felt God speak to me at that point that He's called me to be a lighthouse … majorly in my teaching role, I feel like I'm seeing that work through, having the privilege of being a lighthouse to so many students, generations of … young people coming through. [Gabe, 1st interview]

Even when no direct reference to such transcendent moments were made, participants repeatedly attributed the events that led to their transformation to God's orchestration. Jane articulated a belief that she would have ended up a different teacher if not for God's intervention in her learning and teaching trajectory. Tanya spoke of creative inspiration from God—akin to Roy's (2008) "'serendipitous moments' when 'inspired, unplanned insights emerge" (p. 43)—that seemed to drive key interactions with students and shape her ideas at the school. She also expressed a gratefulness to God for what she perceived as God's persistence in continually presenting her with teaching opportunities until she finally realized that she was indeed meant to teach. These perspectives, particularly from Gabe, Tanya, and Jane reflect a conviction that their faith and teacher journeys are intertwined; so that their identity as Christians animates their teacher identity and their teaching (Glanzer & Alleman, 2019).

5.1.4 Knowledge

An aesthetic experience is thought to have occurred in the area of knowledge when all the information coheres for an individual and provides a broadened and deepened comprehension of situations, subjects, or perspectives (Girod et al., 2003; Girod & Wong,

2002). In the sphere of learning this is something akin to an 'aha! moment in a learning experience (Hobbs & Kelly, 2016). Such an experience not only enhances understanding at that moment, but also incites anticipation and curiosity for further learning and understanding. Girod and Wong (2002) explained, "We believe aesthetic understanding is not an end state but only a jumping off-point that compels people to learn more" (p. 206). In this study, the aesthetic lens was used to highlight participants' understanding of teaching in general, and Christian teaching in particular.

Clandinin and Connelly (1986, 2000) conceptualized a teacher's *personal practical knowledge* as the embodied and coherent product of their professional and personal experiences. As such, the focus on participants' knowledge and understanding in this study comprises participants' understanding gleaned not just from distinctly professional training but also from their own personal experiences as a learner and then as a teacher.

All the participants are registered teachers in the state where they are employed—a qualification that requires passing initial teacher education and registration requirements as mandated by state authorities and based on nationally recognized standards (*Become a Registered Teacher*, n.d.). Elise and Tanya went through initial teacher education (ITE) in their undergraduate studies while Gabe and Jane undertook ITE as graduate programs, subsequent to completing computer engineering and psychology degrees respectively. Among the participants, only Elise appeared to undergo an aesthetic experience related to teaching during her ITE program. As mentioned previously, she described a sudden realization during her practicum that she was not only capable and skilled at teaching, but that teaching brought her pleasure. It was this realization that confirmed her trajectory into a teaching career but also quickened her desire to provide positive learning experiences for her students.

> I just really love giving the students that feeling that I got when I was younger, the 'aha' moments. And going through everything and making sure that they understand what is being taught to them and trying to come at it in a different way if they don't. [Elise, 1st interview]

For Gabe, Tanya, and Jane, aesthetic experience was prominent in their accounts of their post graduate studies and related professional development activities, which challenged their understanding of the purpose and nature of Christian education and their role in it. One of the stated purposes of the post graduate courses at NICE is "transforming worldview assumptions" (Beech, 2018, p. 26) in the long term, so that Christian teachers' understanding of teaching Christianly is not only supplemented but more importantly, reshaped. For Gabe the discovery of what Christian teaching ought to look like was a process that was aided by these studies and other professional development events. In fact, early forays into understanding the Christian worldview and its relationship with teaching were confusing for Gabe. He shared, "I couldn't put all the threads together … What do we do? How do we actually teach mathematics from a biblical point of view?" [Gabe, 1st interview]. The gradual "coming to understand" (Hobbs & Kelly, 2016, p. 56) was through a progression of learning stimuli that built knowledge upon knowledge until Gabe could describe this cohering of knowledge as increased clarity about how to teach mathematics from a Christian worldview: "I think I get it now … I understand more of the depth of what we are going for" [1st interview]. This has prompted Gabe into further inquiry into teaching Christianly and stirred his anticipation of greater depth in understanding his role as a teacher and a subject leader simultaneous to his role as a worshipper of God.

While Gabe's learning experience around teaching Christianly related specifically to his subject area, the impact of similar learning experiences for Tanya and Jane related more broadly toward teaching for student well-being and flourishing, regardless of subject. The

message to students that "God loves them implicitly and they are so important" [Tanya, 1st interview] undergirds Tanya's teaching. For Jane, the objective in teaching is to enable students to apprehend and appreciate the idea that their lives are meaningful and purposeful. Both participants' perspectives are borne out of a deep and compelling engagement with the Christian metanarrative which was a core aspect of their post graduate studies.

It was noted that Elise had also undergone additional training in Christian education; but one that was more specific to a particular church denomination (i.e., different to the one provided by NICE). While these studies certainly provided her with greater content knowledge, unlike the other participants, Elise did not relate any significant changes in her self-concept or her passions as a result of that greater knowledge. Without the shifts in perceptions and attitudes and a stimulation of curiosity and further inquiry (Girod et al., 2010), this additional training did not constitute an aesthetic experience for Elise. The Christian education course at NICE is consistently offered to all the teachers at Ananeo Christian School; as are other professional development opportunities related to Christian teaching and learning. If Elise chooses to participate in these activities, it would be interesting to further explore the aesthetic qualities of her experience and any resulting transformations of her perspectives and self-concept.

5.1.5 The Value of the Aesthetic Lens

The use of the aesthetic lens in this study was intended to expose teachers' implicit beliefs about how their Christian faith related to their teaching practice. It was an effort to highlight the passions, identity orientations, and understanding (knowledge) inherent in both their faith declarations and teaching practices; and observe interrelatedness across both the faith and teaching arenas. In some ways, using an aesthetic lens to analyze teachers' narratives made the task of exploring teachers' stories more cumbersome. The effort it took to identify aesthetic experiences and the consequent impact of these on teachers' passions,

knowledge, and identity seemed limiting at times. However, that limitation also served to focus analysis on those elements that were salient to understanding how Christian teachers connected their faith to their practice, with regards to their motivations for teaching, their content and pedagogical knowledge, and their conceptions of their roles as educators. Although Hobbs and Kelly (2016) had conceptualized a more integral relationship between passion, identity, and knowledge, attending to each dimension of the KIP model separately in this study made possible an exploration of the common understanding among the participants of what being a Christian teacher and teaching Christianly is all about.

A focus on aesthetics also revealed other interesting commonalities among the participants. Aesthetic experiences are a result of a moving encounter with an 'other'. This other, according to Dewey (1934) may be a person or something inanimate like an idea or a story in a book. It was noteworthy that nearly all the cathartic experiences recounted by the participants involved key relationships (i.e., with people). In addition, while the discussion around aesthetic experiences generally involves positive and moving events, the participants' narratives revealed negative experiences can be equally compelling and can impact an individual similarly to those experiences that are deemed aesthetic (i.e., attractive or pleasing) in nature. Elise's negative encounter with her primary school teacher shaped her determination to ensure her students' wellbeing was paramount in her teaching. In this case, Dewey's aesthetic experience might be likened in its outcome to Mezirow's concept of a *disorienting dilemma* (Fleming, 2022; Hodge, 2014) as an agent/catalyst for transformation.

Aesthetic experiences were not often responsible for the participants' decision to enter the teaching profession, but for all the participants these experiences certainly influenced the kind of teachers they became and the commitments and passions that they pursued in teaching. In similar fashion, spiritual experiences, which qualify as aesthetic in their ability to move and transform individuals (English & Doddington, 2019), were not highlighted in the

participants' journey into teaching but were prominent in the narratives of their practice. Finally, the act of telling their stories itself (which will be discussed at length later) constituted an aesthetic experience for all the participants. There were several times during the interviews that tears came unbidden at the recollection of an event. It was evidence that the stories being relayed were not mere recounts of historical events but rather expressions of deeply moving experiences. Even though tucked away in long term memory banks, recalling these experiences could nevertheless elicit a visceral and poignant response. These emotional responses are exactly what Dewey had in mind in describing the initial impact of aesthetic experiences (English & Doddington, 2019) and what Girod and Wong (2002) termed the *dramatic and compelling* that could unite ideas, shift perspectives, and elucidate motivations. The application of an aesthetic lens to participants' narratives elucidated the significance of their experiences in shaping their commitments, identities, and knowledge. This in turn provided greater insight into their conceptions of how their faith related to their teaching and the extent to which this relationship influenced their practice.

In adopting an aesthetic lens to analyze teacher narratives, I recognize that I have taken an approach that blurs the distinction between thinking about stories and thinking of stories. Bochner and Riggs (2014) may consider the analytic standpoint inherent in this approach as more closely linked to "narrative-under-analysis" (p. 23), which emphasizes the scrutiny of form and content to explore a phenomenon and research question through narratives. They claim this approach stands in stark contrast to the practice of evocative narrative research whose objective is to "link theory to story by inviting others to think and feel with the story, staying with it, resonating with the story's moral dilemmas, identifying with its ambiguities, examining its contradictions, feeling its nuances and letting the story analyze them" (p. 20).

As mentioned before, there are many ways that narrative researchers endeavor to explore the narratives they encounter (Hunter, 2010). Rather than dichotomizing these approaches into two extreme positions of analytical or cognitive on one end and affective on the other, I view them as working within a continuum to draw out meaning from experiences. That aesthetic understanding (which undergirds the aesthetic lens that was used in this study) assumes an integration of cognitive and affective responses to experience (Girod & Wong, 2002) further supports this position. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the aesthetic lens is dependent on the richness of the narratives being told. So, it is to the power of narratives and storytelling that we now turn.

5.2 On the Power of Narratives

Although it is intuitive to suggest that past experiences shape a person's perspective, it was mentioned previously that meaning is not inherent in the experiences of the teachers. Rather, it is in the telling of these stories that sense and meaning are made and articulated, often to the surprise of the storyteller themselves. Connelly et al. (1997) suggested that in trying to comprehend what teachers know and how they teach from this knowledge base, it is critical that their entire landscape of experiences (personal and professional) be taken into account. Furthermore, the *personal practical knowledge* that results from these experiences, "is visible in the stories teachers live, tell, retell and relive in their classrooms" (Ross & Chan, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, while participants' stories are relived in their classrooms, the stories span the range of their experiences as young learners themselves in the classroom, as teachers in training, and as practicing professionals.

The participants in this study were asked to tell stories of three distinct periods or phases in their lives: their experiences as learners; their journey into the profession; and their development and growth as teachers. Despite their propensity toward explanations of their teaching philosophy and practice, their stories from these three phases flowed easily as they

connected formative events and relationships and traced integrative themes throughout their narratives.

5.2.1 Coherence: Making Sense of Their Own Stories

Coherence has been identified as a significant component in studying people's narratives (Adler et al., 2007). Its usefulness lies in the basic premise that coherence allows for the story to make sense to the storyteller and to their audience. Ota (2014) uses the phrase "drive for coherence" (p. 41) to describe the innate desire and even need that people have for their experiences to connect together toward a story that makes sense. Coherence in narratives is expressed structurally, orienting the experience in time and context; thematically, expressing key messages or topics; and integratively, drawing experiences together and weaving them into a larger story (Adler et al., 2007). Most importantly, there is narrative coherence in stories when the storyteller ascribes personal meaningfulness to experiences (Baerger & McAdams, 1999). Adler et al. (2007) noted that researchers, particularly those attempting to gauge the degree of narrative coherence in relation to various aspects of well-being, tended to define coherence in different ways. Generally speaking, however, Adler et al (2007) suggested that coherence "encompasses more than just the smooth flow of the story, also capturing its success in orienting the audience, making a clear evaluative point supported by affective language and orienting the specific episode within the context of broader life themes or meanings" (p.161).

There was no intention in this study to measure the degree or level of narrative coherence in the participants' stories. Rather, the interest was in what experiences the participants highlighted in their narratives and the importance and influence that they ascribed to these experiences as they sought to tell their stories as learners and as teachers. Inasmuch as the main question of the study sought to underscore the connections that teachers themselves made between their faith journey and their teaching (i.e., the faith and

teaching connection), narrative coherence as a concept was inherently salient to the discussion.

Although the interview prompts would have guided participants into temporally well-structured accounts—starting with their experiences as learners and progressing toward their current experiences as teachers—the connections the participants were making even as they narrated their stories were spontaneous and instinctive. Their recollections were mostly special memories about events or relationships rather than a mere historical recounting of their life as students. This supports the notion that they were instinctively highlighting key moments in their stories, connecting past to present, and tracing integrative themes throughout their life stories.

Even unprompted, Jane could seamlessly connect her past to the present, and imagine future possibilities on the basis of the present. Remembering her own views of schooling as a young person and the subsequent non-traditional experiences of her early teaching life, Jane articulated how these were necessary to transform her into the teacher that she had now becom. Moreover, with her present disposition as a teacher she could envision further forays into student well-being, championing both the emotional and academic flourishing and developments of those she taught. Similarly, Elise's memories of profound learning moments as a child were impetus in the present for her choices in the classroom and her desires for her own students.

Apart from temporal coherence, during the storytelling participants were quick to point out integrative themes as they emerged. Remarks such as "I have always loved learning" from Elise [1st interview] or general comments from Gabe like "I was always good at maths" [1st interview] dotted their accounts of their learning journey; intending to explain their current roles and perspectives about teaching. For Tanya, divine guidance was the undergirding theme of her narrative. She credited God's leading not just for her trajectory

into teaching and her current post at Ananeo Christian School, but also for the daily outworking of her teaching practice.

When discussing their growth and development as teachers, contextual coherence was the most prominent in the participants' narratives. That is, the participants began to elaborate on their stories while orienting their experiences around what was happening in their families, communities, and the school. Jane for example, understood that her decision to go into teaching was precipitated by a desire to have transferable skills in case her husband, who was studying to be a pastor at the time, had to relocate. However, she could also identify a higher motivation, that of service to God, that influenced that decision to go into teaching. She recalled reasoning that she could serve God "just as well as a teacher as a church worship leader" [Jane, 1st interview]. It was the first reference in her narratives that she understood that her faith perspectives permeated every aspect of her life including her profession. Gabe, meanwhile, could attribute his initial motivation to go into teaching as stemming from his desire to mentor young people as he did at his church youth group. Connecting his teacher story to this experience as a youth group leader was also critical to his grappling with the distinctives between the teacher and youth leader roles. Perhaps the most poignant example of contextual coherence comes from Tanya's declaration that her story was only part of all the events and occurrences happening at the school—a small piece of the bigger story of the school over which God's providence presides.

Indeed, all the participants saw their employment at the school as God-ordained, but for different reasons. For Elise, the history that her husband's family had with Ananeo contributed to her desire to belong to that same community. So, she actively sought employment at this particular school even as she sensed God's leading to do so. Despite challenges and unexpected setbacks that left her feeling discouraged and despondent at the time, she looked back at her journey to Ananeo and recognized that every experience was

necessary part of a bigger picture which "God envisioned" for her life [Elise, 1st interview]. Although Tanya had previous connections with the school (having attended high school at Ananeo), she did not actively or deliberately seek employment there. Nevertheless, after six months of being employed at the school, she had a sense of belonging and connection to the school community which she described as feeling like she had "come home". It completely changed her perspective on her suitability as a teacher. She likewise credits God's guidance for such an outcome. Jane's understanding of God's providence in her role was a result of evaluating all the events that she had experienced to shape her for the role she was undertaking. For Gabe it was a sense that teaching was a reflection and expression of being the 'lighthouse' that God called him to be as revealed through a spiritual experience and repeatedly confirmed through various instances in his teaching life. However, these connections that participants made between their faith and teaching journeys extend beyond the vocational dimension; that is their sense of being guided into the profession. The impact of their faith on their teaching practice and ways of being a teacher—perspectives on what it might mean to teach Christianly—will be explored next.

5.2.2. Participants Reflecting on Their Narratives

It is a distinctive of Christian schooling that matters of faith which are based on a biblical perspective not only have prominence but permeate every aspect of school life (Cairney, 2018; Edlin, 2014; Horan, 2017; Prior, 2021). By implication, every teacher in a Christian school should have biblical principles as the basis for their pedagogy, curricular choices, and ways of relating to students (Roy, 2008, 2013). In short, their whole teaching practice and ways of being a teacher would be animated by their faith (Glanzer & Alleman, 2019). Yet, de Muynck (2022) suggests that teachers do not naturally connect theology or theological principles to their teacher identity or teaching practice. Those who are able to do

so have generally been trained to be reflective along these lines; and even then, making these connections requires some effort.

Gabe recalls initial confusion and consternation about how to apply such biblical principles, which he so readily affirmed as a Christian, in teaching mathematics. The journey toward a firmer understanding of the faith-teaching relationship was aided and enhanced by continuous and consistent training and further studies. Indeed, the participants (Gabe, Tanya, and Jane) who expressed through their stories the outworking of their faith in their teaching had all received extensive mentoring and underwent (or still are still undergoing) graduate studies through NICE. Given that the graduate programs at NICE are designed specifically to help develop Christian teachers' capacity to teach from a biblical perspective (Beech, 2018), it is not surprising that these participants could articulate narratively the faith and teaching connection.

For Gabe, the turning point was the realization that mathematics is an expression of God's glory and therefore teaching mathematics is a form of worship. Successful teaching moments for him involved helping students likewise understand that

> the beauty of mathematics definitely can cry out God's glory and God's praises … it [teaching mathematics] goes a little bit deeper than just looking at the material…. It's a much bigger concept than just the formulas that we're rote learning. And then it starts to link into things like design and of the world and starting to see patterns.

Gabe was expressing the understanding that an important goal of Christian education is the illumination of all that is in the world (content) as part of God's creation; which is to be discovered, analyzed, and learned in light of and in service to God's purposes (Cairney, 2018; Edlin, 2014; Harris, 2015; D. I. Smith, 2018).

Such purposes directly relate to the students as the understanding and skills they gain in the learning process are meant to lead not just to worship of God (J. K. A. Smith, 2009) but

to service to others and care for the world (Cairney, 2018; Edlin, 2014; Partridge, 2021; D. I. Smith, 2018). Jane and Tanya's stories were punctuated by constant efforts to highlight their students' value as uniquely gifted individuals and to validate the purposefulness of their learning as a means for "making someone's life better" (Jane, 1st interview). In this way, the learning journey was posited as an expression of the faith journey, an acknowledgement that

> God has equipped mankind with the capacity to know and reason so we might be able to create, remember, solve problems, imagine, and discover…our ultimate purpose is to see such knowledge used for God's purposes (Cairney, 2018, p. 51).

All the participants also expressed their understanding of the faith and teaching relationship in terms of ways of being a teacher. Smith (2009) posits that "… education is most fundamentally a matter of formation, a task of shaping and creating a certain kind of people" (p. 26). In this endeavor of formation, the teacher as mentor and role model figure prominently (Edlin, 2014; Horan, 2017). It was in the goal of such practices that participants related their faith to teaching. Even though Gabe initially struggled to differentiate between being a youth leader and a teacher, he was never unclear about wanting to be a mentor and support to young people in light of God's intentions. Being a teacher allowed him to exercise those roles in even greater measure as he worked "alongside them [students] for their growth and their benefit … helping them to become all that God created them to be … in all the areas of their lives" [Gabe, 1st interview]. Although Jane associated mentoring with her earlier experience in non-traditional schooling, her teacher stories in her current role were also filled with instances of mentoring her students as they explored education and career pathways with her. Jane's faith perspective was both the basis and the purpose by which she guided and advised her students:

> whenever I'm talking to students about how they can serve God, it's from that perspective, that we all have the same purpose … to bring restoration to God's broken

> world through the gifts and talents that he has given to us … and if we're doing something, and that something is making someone's life better, then we are fulfilling our purpose. [Jane, 2nd interview]

Meanwhile Elise saw modelling as a responsibility inherent in her identity as a Christian teacher. As she shared, "When I'm teaching, I'm also reflecting God. And I need to be aware that how students perceive me as a Christian teacher is how they may perceive what Christians in general are like." Corollary to this was her expressed desire to form strong relationships with her students that they might know that she "cares about them and has their best interest at heart." Similarly, Tanya highlighted relating well with her students as a key motivation in her teaching. This motivation finds basis in her faith. Treating others as "God wants me to treat them and see them how he sees them" alongside an authentic approach to teaching has earned Tanya a reputation as a teacher to be trusted. "That's the beauty of it all. We're all in the same boat, just at different places and struggling with different things" [2nd interview]. Tanya understood that as a teacher she and her students were part of a community of faith (Cairney, 2018; Harris, 2015)

These perspectives emerged from stories of their interactions with students and were articulated not so much as required tasks of a Christian teacher but as a natural outcome of their own ongoing reflection on and practice of their Christian faith. Through their stories therefore, the participants have indicated how their faith has influenced their teaching practice and their ways of being a teacher; and they have done so in both the exercise of narrative coherence and the highlighting of aesthetic experiences that have shaped their understanding, passions, and sense of self.

5.2.3 On the act of storytelling

The affective response of participants in the act of storytelling was earlier noted as consistent with and reflective of aesthetic experiences which produces compelling inertia

towards further learning and development (English & Doddington, 2019). Baerger and McAdams (1999) consider such affect to be inherent in coherent life stories because "stories exist to convey emotionally significant information, whether that information is an evaluation of the story content or a revelation about the speaker" (p. 71).

It is precisely because of the significance that participants attributed to their experiences that the interviews were an emotional exercise for some. The mere opportunity to tell their stories served as poignant reminders of the experiences that shaped their commitments and identities as teachers. Tanya commented, "that's cool to remember how I got here and why I'm here." Gabe called his storytelling exercise "an absolute blessing" not only for the validation of his efforts and purpose for teaching that it provided, but also for the richer perspective it afforded. Gabe concluded that telling his story "… has helped me have a deeper insight into my teaching and the impact which I have the privilege to make." Seeing its benefits, Gabe also expressed a desire to make reflecting on his story a regular habit.

Interestingly, for Jane, Elise, and Tanya, reading their interview transcripts was an even more moving experience than just hearing themselves tell their stories. Jane, who spoke of getting teary while reading her transcript, found that reading allowed her a greater depth of reflection and learning. It was "the first time I've been given the opportunity to reflect on my words in writing … being able to read those words seemed to have quite a lot more power than just listening to them" [2nd interview]. For Elise reading the transcript provided her with another way of reflecting on herself and her experiences: "It definitely put me in a viewer's point of view rather than my own … head space" [2nd interview]. Although Tanya claimed to have gleaned little fresh insight from reading her transcript, she was nevertheless, stirred by the process. She recalled, "It was quite emotional reading it, in a good way … again makes me appreciate the job I have and that I did listen to God's call of my life."

Even as books require readers, storytellers need to have listening audiences for whom they will shape and form their stories (Ota, 2014). Although people engage endlessly in internal storytelling as they make sense of their experiences, many of these stories often remain in the subconscious until they are verbally expressed to another (Vogel, 2012). In the audible telling of such stories, not only are key events and experiences highlighted over others, these experiences are subjected to interpretation and reinterpretation as past events are connected to current experiences and oriented around new understandings and perspectives (Thomas, 2012). "When someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience and reality" (Chase, 2005, p. 657); thereby contributing to the storyteller's evolving narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). So, while the participants highlighted the personal benefits of storytelling in terms of being reminded of why they do what they do, it was evident there were new insights and perspectives emerging even as they told their stories and I, as the audience, interacted with what they shared.

Jane had repeatedly referred to her early years of teaching as non-traditional. She was surprised when I queried why she felt a need to ascribe labels to her teaching experiences. It took a moment, but when she could finally explain it, stories came pouring forth of how those early years shaped her dispositions and perspectives toward championing her students' well-being (sometimes over school policies and procedures). In the end, she appeared to have gleaned a greater understanding of her identity and practice: "I think that's where my experience of my non-traditional teaching life, I think has created this foundation for me that I'm never going to be able to separate myself from. There's a revelation" [1st interview].

Elise, in recalling being berated by a teacher in Year 5, was surprised by how much the memory still affected her. Moreover, she realized how much of her passion for providing safe environments for her students was bound up in the memory of that negative encounter with her teacher. Elise's goal in teaching (which was repeatedly articulated through her

narratives) is to "make sure that they [students] feel safe and secure and that nothing like that would ever happen" [2nd interview]. In describing her experience of reading through the transcript of her first interview, Elise admitted to being disappointed in herself. She attributed that to being self-critical. In extrapolating that tendency toward her role as a teacher, she also disclosed the immense burden she feels to be a good model of Christianity to her students:

> I have a huge responsibility in displaying that [Christianity] and showing that to them. And so, I think it's kind of good to always be looking back over [my shoulder] and making sure that the way I'm showing God to others is the way that he would want me to show him to them.

Thoughts and emotions about experiences are born out of people making sense or interpreting their experiences. It is in the storytelling that the deep sentiments emerge (Chase, 2005); often to the surprise of the storytellers themselves. So, although the participants in this study would sometimes revert to explaining their propositional understandings of the relationship between their faith and teaching, it was, in fact, through narrating their stories that these propositions were elaborated on and expounded; and the significance of their experiences were more richly expressed.

5.3 Summary

Multiple aesthetic experiences have shaped the passions, self-concept, and understanding of the participants concerning the relationship between their Christian faith and their teaching. They express this faith-teaching relationship personally, relationally, and pedagogically. The outworking of their Christian faith is recognizable in their dispositions and commitments as a teacher, in their relationships with students and colleagues, and in their teaching practices. Through coherent narratives that situated participants' experiences temporally and contextually, the connections between their faith and teaching were clearly articulated. Narrative inquiry and the application of an aesthetic lens made possible a nuanced

exploration of teachers' perspectives. Moreover, the act of storytelling itself had an aesthetic effect on participants; leading to greater understanding of themselves as Christian teachers and invigorating their commitment to teaching Christianly. The concluding chapter that follows provides a summary of findings, a discussion of the limitations of this study, as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The relationship between faith and teaching is a matter of great interest to proponents of Christian education. Indeed, several studies have attempted to identify and describe this relationship. This study contributes uniquely to this area by focusing on the stories of Christian teachers in order to draw out their perceptions of the intersection between their faith journeys and their teaching practice. In this concluding chapter, a summary of findings is discussed, limitations of the study are considered, and recommendations for future research are presented. Lastly comes an afterword: my own personal reflections to bring to a close this research story.

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study highlighted how four Christian teachers perceive the relationship of their beliefs and faith practices to their teaching. Using participants' narratives, the study attempted to draw out not only what teachers understood conceptually but also the outworking of such an understanding in their classrooms and interactions with students. Furthermore, the application of an aesthetic lens in analyzing their narratives sought to focus on the (aesthetic) experiences that invigorated their passions, transformed their identities, and compelled them to know more. It was anticipated that in identifying such experiences, further connections between participants' faith and teaching journeys might be highlighted.

Through their narratives, participants in this study confirmed that they perceived a relationship between their Christian faith and their teaching. This connection was reflected personally in their commitments, dispositions, and understandings as teachers; relationally, in their interactions with students and colleagues; and pedagogically in the understood purpose behind everything they do as teachers.

For the participants, the faith and teaching connection was primarily reflected in their personal dispositions and perspectives that comprised their passions and commitments, their

self-concept and knowledge. Participants' passions for their subject matter and for their students were expressed and invigorated as a matter of faithfulness and obedience to God. The outworking of their passions was likewise undergirded by a commitment to highlight matters of faith and the Christian worldview in relation to their subject area and to the growth and development of their students. In varying degrees in their narratives, participants conveyed their understanding that the development of their self-concept as teachers was directly related to their conceptions of their Christian identity. Each participant's narrative of their teaching journey relayed a conviction that each of them was uniquely gifted and skilled by God for the purpose of participating in the metanarrative of God's work through education. In that sense, participants' teacher identity was viewed in terms of their Christian identity to make possible a Christian teacher identity. Finally, participants' knowledge, as highlighted through the aesthetic lens, involved their understanding and perspective on what teaching Christianly entailed. In this regard, knowledge meant having a solid grasp of the Christian worldview and applying such knowledge not just in relation to content but also in relation to how they taught their content and how they understood their responsibilities as Christian teachers teaching in a Christian school.

It was evident in the study, that such knowledge of teaching Christianly could not simply be assumed by virtue of the expressed Christian convictions of teachers. Rather, such knowledge was the result of intentional (and sometimes even painstaking) effort and study, enhanced by mentoring relationships with more experienced Christian teachers. In their narratives, passion, identity, and knowledge were spoken of as intertwined entities that impacted each other in a continuous process of growth and development as teachers. More importantly, this area of personal and professional development was viewed in light of God's active involvement in the lives of the teachers. The sense of being guided, influenced, shaped,

and empowered by God was an integrative theme in all the participants' stories and provided the most overarching basis for relating their Christian faith to their practice.

The outworking of the faith and teaching connection was also expressed relationally. Although the intention to teach, care, mentor, and advocate for students, as well as to provide a positive and wholesome environment for learning, is not distinctively indicative of the participants' faith orientation, the rationale behind such intentions is. In relating to and interacting with their students, the participants were motivated by a keen sense of their role as representatives of God and an understanding of the inherent value and dignity of each student as people made in the image of God. Consequently, the ways in which participants related with their students were reflective not only of professional competence but of a spiritual outlook.

How the participants expressed the faith and teaching connection pedagogically was perhaps the most difficult to discern from teachers' stories. It was also in this sphere that the views of the participants were most disparate. Their thoughts ranged from a basic acknowledgement that there is a faith-oriented perspective that can be applied to every subject area to a passionate conviction that the content itself is an expression of worship to God, who not only created all things but remains sovereign over all things. Still for others, the pedagogic distinctive of Christian teaching lay in the purpose of education: to enable students to understand themselves and the world in light of God's story, the Christian metanarrative, so that they, too, may participate in God's activities in the world.

It was borne out in the study that the teachers' life stories, especially of their early experiences as learners, had a profound impact on the kind of teachers they became and the various perspectives they have about teaching. Interpreting these experiences with the understanding that God is actively at work in all aspects of their lives allowed teachers to connect their faith to their dispositions and perspectives. However, this alone did not

guarantee a firm understanding of the distinctives of Christian teaching. In the case of teachers at Ananeo Christian School, specific training in Christian education and mentoring along the same lines were responsible for the participants' robust understanding of the ways in which their Christian faith could and should influence their teaching.

Narratives proved to be an appropriate means of exploring Christian teachers' perceptions. Narrating their life stories allowed formative experiences to emerge, lending insight into how participants dispositions and perspectives have been shaped. Furthermore, the use of the aesthetic lens highlighted their passions, evolving self-concept, and growing understanding; thereby revealing the motivations, commitments and deep hopes of these Christian teachers as enacted in their practice. The act of storytelling was largely a positive and encouraging experience for participants. The interpretation and reinterpretation inherent in the process of telling coherent narratives enabled fresh insights as well as latent perspectives and emotions to surface, often to the surprise and delight of the participants themselves. The fact that their narratives were infused with faith perspectives indicated a strong convergence of participants' personal (which includes their Christian faith perspectives) and professional identities. The extent to which this convergence impacted their teaching was reflected in the ways they described their own development as teachers, their relationships with their students, and the motivations behind their teaching.

The impact of their storytelling was often self-evident and articulated during the interviews themselves. So that even though a whole session had been allocated to a discussion of the impact of storytelling, such a discussion emerged organically through the first and second sessions. The third interaction, which was through email correspondence, merely reiterated what had already been articulated.

6.2 Limitations and Recommendations

Validity which generally refers to the believability, credibility, or plausibility of the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2007; Tracy, 2010) is central to any kind of research. Deciding upon a set of criteria to evaluate validity across disciplines and paradigms is a difficult and sometimes contentious process (Cohen et al., 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). With methodologies like narrative inquiry, which deals with intensely personal and unique stories of individuals' experiences, the question of validity becomes even more pronounced and can present as a limitation of the research. Polkinghorne (2007) asserts, however, that "storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for factual occurrence of events reported by the stories" and that these stories are "the best evidence available to researchers about the realm of people's experience" (p. 479). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the narrative researcher to represent these stories as cogently and coherently as possible and then for the readers to "make a judgment about the plausibility of a knowledge claim based on the evidence and argument for the claim reported by the researcher" (p. 484).

Despite best efforts, a limitation exists in narrative inquiry because the stories people choose to tell and the meanings they express from these stories do not always depict the entire experience.

> The disjunction between a personal actual experienced meaning and his or her storied description has four sources: (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. (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 480)

To this end, supplementing the interviews with classroom observations would have been beneficial. Unfortunately, the restricted time for completing the study did not permit this.

Another limitation pertains to the singular context in which the participants were situated. Christian schools in Australia vary immensely depending on denominational orientations, governance structures, and other distinctive features. Not surprisingly, teaching and learning frameworks and professional development emphases across Christian schools are similarly varied. Ananeo Christian School is a subset of parent-run schools that subscribe to the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith. The school has a strong and long-standing association with a particular peak body that champions the cause of Christian education especially in the arena of faith-integrated and transformational teaching and learning. To a large extent, the perspectives of the participants in this study reflect the perspectives of the communities to which they belong, especially with regards to Christian education. While that has helped in exploring the various influencing factors in the teachers' perspectives, it has also been a limiting element as the findings in this study represent a very small and particular subset of Christian teachers teaching in Christian schools.

A broader understanding of Christian teachers' perception of the faith and teaching connection would require greater diversity in the participant cohort. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies consider participants from a variety of Christian schools. As a matter for further research, it would also be interesting to explore how Christians teaching in state or other non-religious independent schools conceive the influence of their faith on their teaching and how these perspectives develop.

Given the positive impact of storytelling on the participants in this study, the use of narratives and storytelling in professional development—especially as it relates to helping teachers understand the influence of their faith on their teaching—merits further exploration. In addition, investigating how the degree of coherence in teachers' narratives impacts their

sense of self-efficacy would assist in designing narrative-based professional development curriculum.

Finally, this study revealed the importance and benefits to teachers of specific and intentional training in Christian education. Longitudinal research involving teachers undergoing such training—particularly to identify the content and pedagogical elements that give rise to aesthetic experiences—would lend insight to the design of curriculum specific to Christian teacher training and development.

6.3 An Afterword

I began this research project with a curiosity about how teachers understand the distinctives of Christian teaching and the kinds of experiences that give rise to these perceptions. That curiosity very quickly turned into fascination and wonder as I realized the extent to which my engagement with teachers' stories was evoking a sense of a shared purpose and providing mutual encouragement between the participants and myself. I was aware that narrative inquiry promoted *bracketing in*, a researcher's personal involvement with the participants and immersion in their narratives as they told their stories. Nevertheless, the degree of mutuality was a pleasant surprise.

At the onset of the project, there was already mutual benefit to speak of. I appreciated the participants' willingness to provide 'data' for my study; and given their initial enthusiastic response, it appeared to me that they too anticipated some satisfaction and maybe even enjoyment from their participation. By the end of the interview process, the participants reported drawing encouragement from being reminded, through their own storytelling, of the reason they were teaching and the ways that they could see God's providence and guidance through their journeys. There were moments of new realization as well, providing them with fresh insight into their own responses to the responsibilities and challenges of their jobs. For

me, the insights I gleaned from engaging with participants and their stories were transformative.

The participants were explicit in their appreciation of the opportunity to tell their stories; for which I was heartened. Yet, what was significant for me was the implicit meaning behind their expressions of appreciation: a comprehension that their individual stories mattered. The idea that I was complicit, through this study, in helping participants realize that their stories and who they were (as embodied in these stories) held immense value, reoriented my own perspectives and motivations for completing the study. In short, the research activity had become for me an aesthetic experience; causing me to reflect upon my own story and how I viewed my research in light of my faith journey. The aesthetic lens that allowed me to explore the participants' enlivened passions, changing self-concepts, and motivating understandings, also illumined my own passions, identity and understanding.

This research experience has affirmed a commitment I have had through various roles in my career, to encourage and support Christian teachers in their understanding and enactment of teaching Christianly. More specifically, it is a passion to help Christian teachers recognize how their stories connect to the metanarrative of the Christian faith; and with that understanding to inspire them to persevere in their roles. The teachers' stories also gave expression to my understanding of the purpose of my research endeavors, which goes beyond making a contribution to existing knowledge in the field. In listening to and immersing myself in participants' stories, I participated in "making someone's life better" [Jane, 1st interview]. Moreover, in connecting my own research journey with my understanding of God's grand story, I began to understand (as Gabe did about mathematics) how engaging in research could constitute worship of God. Through this experience, my identity as a researcher has been transformed, my passions have been affirmed, and a greater

understanding about the shaping of Christian teachers' perspectives has compelled me to dig deeper in the field of Christian teaching.

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