

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP 2004

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF
THE 'CENTRE FOR TEACHER FORMATION',
AN EXPLORATION INTO HOW THESE CAN BE APPLIED
IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES FOR AUSTRALIAN EDUCATORS
AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS
RELATED TO TEACHER FORMATION.

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Dated

Andrea Dean

25 August 2005

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Précis

In June 2005 I travelled to Seattle, WA, USA, to investigate the formation program for teachers called "The Courage To Teach", developed by Parker J. Palmer and sponsored by the Centre for Teacher Formation. In addition I attended two vacation programs at Seattle University to develop my skills and competence to work in the field of teacher formation.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the practical and generous support of The Winston Churchill Trust, the Sisters of St Joseph (Goulburn) and my colleagues at the Catholic Education Office in Canberra who all contributed to enabling me to undertake this investigation.

In the United States, the staff members of the Centre for Teacher Formation (Bainbridge Island, WA) were extraordinarily helpful, as were the staff of Seattle University.

Executive Summary

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Fellowship Objective

To explore the potential application of the program in teacher formation known as "Courage To Teach" for the Australian context.

Fellowship Highlights

- Discussions with Marcy Jackson, co-director of the Centre for Teacher Formation, Bainbridge Island, WA.
- Participation in the *Circle of Trust* retreat "Sustaining identity and Integrity in Professional Life" at the Palisades Retreat Centre, Seattle, WA.

Findings

There is scope for an introduction of formation programs into Australia that are modelled on "Courage To Teach". Initial implementation can readily occur in the education sector but opportunities to make this program available to other service-oriented professions is also possible.

Introduction of teacher formation programs could benefit participants by fostering a deep connection to profession of teaching, reinvigorating those who have lost enthusiasm for their work, deepening personal commitment to the work of teaching, extending the length of time that teachers work in the profession and improving the quality of teaching.

Implementation

I will

- co-facilitate a sample retreat in the "Courage To Teach" format that is planned for March, 2006.
- publish an article on *Teacher Spirituality* for The Journal of Religious Education.
- promote the model of teacher formation through seminars and presentations to regional meetings with Directors of Religious Education (NSW and ACT); the National Conference of Directors of Education and Directors of Religious Education (Melbourne, August 2005); Religious Education and Spirituality Conference (Sydney, September 2006); Teacher Education Students at Australian Catholic University, Canberra; etc.

With a Working Party

- Plan for the training of teacher formation facilitators in Australia in July 2006;
- Explore avenues for financial support of teacher formation programs;
- Investigate issues of content and/or style that may need to be adjusted in "Courage To Teach" to better suit the Australian context.

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Programme

Seattle, Washington State, USA.

June 15 – June 22

- Opportunities to meet with staff of the Center for Teacher Formation, Bainbridge Island, WA and exploration of the context in which the program is conducted.

June 25 – July 8

- Participation in the Vacation Classes at Seattle University: *Christian Anthropology* with Ron Rolheiser.

July 11-15

- Participation in the Vacation Classes at Seattle University: *Awakening the Sacred Through The Arts* with Judith Boyle and Joannie Cassidy.

July 18-20

- Participation in the *Circle of Trust* retreat “Sustaining Identity and Integrity in Professional Life” at the Palisades Retreat Centre, Seattle, WA. Facilitators: Penny Williamson and John Morehead.

Background

Since the early 1980's, Parker J. Palmer has been writing about the spiritual dimension of education. His basic contention is that good teaching emerges from the inner self of the teacher. He suggests that when a person's 'soul and role' mesh together, when he/she does not feel divided but whole, then that person is able to experience greater fulfilment in the work of teaching and to be a better teacher. He suggests that the answer to the disillusionment that many teachers experience is not found in programs or books but within the person. Palmer proposes that each person get in touch with ' the soul- that life-giving core of the human self ...(which) ... has ... power to guide our lives." ¹.

The Fetzer Institute², a philanthropic organisation which sponsors programs that seek to address issues at their root, invited Palmer to develop a concrete program that would contribute to the revitalisation of public education in the United States. This invitation eventually led to the initiation in 1994 of a two-year program of seasonal retreats known as "Courage To Teach". This program of quarterly retreats, designed for preK-12 educators seeks to foster the personal and professional renewal of teachers, administrators, and counsellors in public schools in the United States. "Courage To Teach" focuses on renewing the inner lives of professionals in education rather than promoting particular skills or content for teaching.

Since 1997 the Centre for Teacher Formation has sponsored "Courage To Teach" and is committed to developing, deepening, and expanding the work of teacher formation and "Courage To Teach" in the United States.³ As well as organizing retreats for educators, training facilitators to lead retreats, publishing and disseminating material about teacher formation, promoting a wide discourse about education, the Centre endeavours to attract funding to subsidize the cost of attendance at "Courage To Teach" retreats for public school educators.

Implementation

Typically a "Courage To Teach" group consists of twenty to thirty educators who gather for three-day quarterly retreats over two-year period. Two facilitators oversee the program and lead the sessions. Concepts of teacher formation and "the heart of the teacher" are explored through private reflection, in both small group and large-group activities. Ideas are investigated by drawing on personal stories, reflections on classroom practice and insights from poets, storytellers and various wisdom traditions.

Each retreat follows a seasonal theme, using the overall metaphor of the seasons as a way of exploring vocational and life questions.⁴ These metaphors and related ideas help to host an open but focused inquiry into life issues. For example the metaphor of 'seeds' may be used to reflect on the beginnings or sources of one's vocation to be a teacher or the metaphor of 'blizzards' may similarly be used to reflect on the difficulties that one experiences in life or work.

The retreats are thoughtfully planned to allow for 'spaciousness' and a physical environment that supports reflection is chosen. Processes are simple and focus on allowing the truth to emerge from one's own heart. Typically a session will start with a brief introduction by a facilitator and then a piece of poetry will be shared. Reflection questions are offered to stimulate engagement with vocational issues. After a time of quiet, sharing with others may occur in a structured way. Participants are gradually introduced to skills and practices of deep listening and open questioning. The session closes with participants regathering where an invitation is offered for participants to comment on how the time of reflection has been for them.

Evaluation

Participants of one "Courage To Teach" style retreat that ran over three days in 2005, reported that they found "the open structure" helpful and that the "non-directive model allowed the gift of self to blossom". Also they appreciated "the complete focus on, and trust in, the process as opposed to the personality of the presenter" and the "open structure, the space that allowed the spirit to move, the fire to burn". The retreat affirmed for them the "importance of time and space", "the possibilities that lie ahead through the increased use of open and honest questions" and "the empowerment that comes from being held in deep and loving silence".⁵

Data from teachers who have participated in the complete two-year program in Canada and USA suggest that a deep growth occurs. The evaluation of "The Courage To Teach" that was undertaken in New England (1999-2001) indicates "that an overwhelming majority of the participants felt the CTT program increased their ability to act with courage and integrity; renewed their commitment to their profession; enhanced their approach to leadership; improved their relationships with colleagues; and strengthened their teaching."

Further, a longitudinal evaluation (2000) "documents the program's lasting impact on participants. It lifts up the importance of helping educators reconnect with their vocational purpose and passion, and highlights the potential of this approach to retain good teachers

and improve educational outcomes.”

The overall impact on teachers was summarized in these seven points:

1. Teachers' Passion for Teaching is Rejuvenated
2. Teachers Undertake New Leadership Roles
3. Teachers Seek Out Interactions with Colleagues
4. Teachers Practice Reflective Inquiry
5. Teachers Change the Way They Teach
6. Teachers See Tangible Benefits for their Students
7. Teachers Practice More Mindful Living

While similar responses from Australian teachers cannot be guaranteed, the benefits of the program amongst US educators suggests that it would be beneficial in this educational context also.

Developments

Courage To Teach operates in several school districts in the USA. Internationally there is interest in the program from educators in Canada, Australia and England. Four facilitators from Canada have been trained and the catholic school system in the Toronto area is sponsoring teachers to attend the program and employs facilitators. Some adaptations have been made to suit the cultural context of Canada under the adapted program is known as The Courage to Serve.

Short retreats based on Courage To Teach were held in Singapore. Facilitators prepared for the retreats by learning about Singapore’s culture, aware of the significant religious and ethnic diversity and drew on local poetry etc in the sessions. For many participants the engagement with a quiet, reflective process was demanding when the surrounding culture surged with extraordinary activity and pressure.

Expansion within the USA is measured. The Centre for Teacher Formation is committed to maintaining the quality of the “Courage To Teach” model, thus only a select number of facilitators are trained over a two-year period. While undergoing facilitator training, mentoring and support is offered. While there are clear parameters for facilitators and the role is unobtrusive, it requires maturity and an ability to handle complexity. This concern to

select appropriate facilitators and to provide careful preparation means that there is no large-scale plan to increase the number of facilitators or to provide retreats and programs in every school district.

Each year the Centre for Teacher Formation has offered a condensed, sample retreat for those interested in the program but who are unable to participate in the two-year pattern of seasonal retreats. In recent years this has been called “Principles and Practices” and attendees from various professional backgrounds have ‘tasted’ teacher formation and been encouraged to apply these ideas to their various contexts. In 2005, the sampler retreat was renamed the “Circles of Trust Retreat: Reclaiming Identity and Integrity in Professional Life” and people from “diverse serving professions: education, health care, law, philanthropy, non-profit organizations, and religious communities” were invited to attend. The intention of these retreats is to encourage the same deep connection between inner self and vocation and to foster a renewed passion for one’s work.

The title “Circle of Trust” describes the kind of environment that is created within “Courage To Teach” programs initially and now fostered in other programs. Much of the time within these programs is spend sitting in a circle, where is member of circle is heard and respected, where no one dominates. Symbolically this title refers to relational quality that develops as trust is extended and received between members of the group. Parker Palmer writes; “a circle of trust holds us in a space where we can make our own discernments, in our own way and time, in the encouraging and challenging presence of other people.”⁶

The Center For Teacher Formation is considering a name change to better reflect the broader focus that is developing as other people serving in other professions take up the principles of Parker Palmer’s writings. While no official confirmation is available at this point, the new title will capture ideals of “courage and renewal and the challenge of reconnecting who you are with what you do”.⁷

There is no doubt that a program which produces such an impact in teachers’ lives could enrich Australian education and wider society.

Personal skills and competence

The main focus of my Churchill Fellowship was the teacher formation program inspired by Parker Palmer and a derivative focus was on enhancing my knowledge and skills to work competently in the area.

The first class at Seattle University (Anthropology) provided insight into theoretical understandings of the human person. This investigation of major shifts in the understanding the human person reflected in modernism, post-modernism, existentialism etc. helped me to understand the complexity of today's world and to perceive why the process of discernment and self-discovery encouraged by "Courage To Teach" could be helpful to many people. If there is an avenue to research the implementation of Courage To teach in Australia, some contextualization in anthropology will be essential.

The second class (Awakening the Sacred through the Arts) was an example of using diverse, creative methods to stimulate learning. A wide range of artistic processes including storytelling, drama, interplay and movement were employed and ways to apply them in practical projects was explored. This class supplemented the processes that I experienced in the 'Circle of Trust Retreat' and there will be many techniques that I can apply in professional development work with teachers.

Recommendations

1. That the model of development and administration of "The Courage To Teach" program by "The Center for Teacher Formation" be adopted in Australia in order to:

- Foster adaptation to the Australian educational and cultural context
- Enable collaboration amongst those interested in implementing 'The Courage To Teach' ideals in Australia.

2. That a website be developed to publicise the development of "The Courage To Teach" in Australia.

- Creating an online community of those interested in the work of Parker Palmer
- Demonstrate a connection to the website of the Centre for Teach Formation
- Advertise programs and provide literature to promote "The Courage To Teach".

3. That connections be maintained with the Centre for Teacher Formation in the US and that developments in Australia be informed by initiatives in Canada where adaptations to "The Courage To Teach" are reflected in their program called "The Courage to Serve".

That developments in Australia

- Foster the ability to talk across difference and diversity (racial, cultural, hierarchy, grade level and private/public system bias)

- Allow for the inclusion of persons from professions other than education
 - Not be seen as a panacea for the very genuine needs for reform and support in education.
4. Focus on various ways to promote the ideals of “Courage To Teach” ie beyond the participation in the full two year program. Options may include forming study/reflection groups to read publications such as “A Hidden Wholeness” and discuss their responses, participation in short sessions eg one day, that are modelled on “Courage To Teach”.
5. That substantial local research be undertaken to ascertain the effect of the program on Australian educators (note the work of Sam Intrator in the US).
6. That a “Working Party”
- Collaborate on the implementation of “Courage To Teach” in Australia to ensure continuity and cooperation amongst educational sectors.
 - Seek funding for the implementation of “Courage To Teach” in order to subsidise costs for participants.

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Endnotes

¹ p.2 Palmer, Parker J. (2004). *A hidden wholeness: The journey toward an undivided life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

² The Fetzer Institute's mission, to foster awareness of the power of love and forgiveness, rests on its conviction that efforts to address the critical issues facing the world must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to the psychological and spiritual roots of these issues. Current work includes research and education programs on altruistic love, compassionate love, and forgiveness; recovering the "heart" of various professions, including teaching, philanthropy, law, and medicine; and exploring the nature of forgiveness, compassion, and love.

(<http://www.fetzer.org/> accessed on Aug 3, 2005)

³ (http://www.teacherformation.org/html/ctf/what_is-f.cfm accessed Aug 3, 2005)

⁴ (http://www.teacherformation.org/html/ctf/what_is-f.cfm accessed Aug 3, 2005)

⁵ Feedback from participants at the sample retreat held Sydney, 2004.

⁶ p. 27, Palmer, Parker J. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness*. San Francisco: JosseyBass.

⁷ Interview with Marcy Jackson