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Relationship as Pedagogy: Empowering Faculty to Support Student Mental Health

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the impact of college student mental health on faculty pedagogy. Using a grounded theory qualitative research methodology, the researcher interviewed 13 faculty participants about their experience of college student mental health in the classroom. A review of the literature on theological anthropology, trauma, and Christian higher education provided a framework for the findings of this study to be discussed. Findings revealed four main themes influencing faculty pedagogy which included: the value of relationships for promoting student well-being; lowered engagement by students experiencing mental health challenges; the increased need for mental health-related accommodations; and the impact of faculty well-being on classroom practice. In response to these themes, the following recommendations for improving relational pedagogy were provided: restoring a sense of faculty well-being and introducing trauma-informed strategies for faculty pedagogy.

Introduction

The relationship between teacher and learner, or faculty and student, holds significance for the mutual learning that occurs in college classrooms as faculty and students act as co-learners in their academic endeavors (Clark et al., 1991). The role of pedagogy is important for informing and shaping the impact faculty can have on a student's well-being beyond just their academic learning. However, there are challenges that arise which interrupt the learning relationship, such as mental health concerns. For faculty, there is an increasing need to consider the impact of mental health as it relates to a student's ability to engage classroom content and succeed academically (McMurtie, 2022).

Additionally, Christian institutions call their faculty and students to abide by certain theological commitments held by their institution's faith heritage. These theological commitments point to the distinctive pedagogy of Christian higher education. Faith and learning serve as cornerstones to the formation promised to college students enrolled at these Christian institutions. Theological anthropology, or the biblical understanding of what it means to be human (Harrison, 2010), provides a guide for intentional engagement with faith-based pedagogy for faculty and students on Christian campuses, affirming the integration of faith and learning at a deeper theological level. Yet college student mental health concerns bring a disruption to the vision of integrated faith and learning as students are arriving to campus with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and experienced trauma (Bohannon et al., 2019; Cox et al., 2015; Davidson, 2017). In addition to mental health concerns, trauma also interferes with a student's learning. Trauma's neurological impact manifests through the body in ways that directly affect student learning (Badenoch, 2008; Dana, 2018; van der Kolk, 2014). In addition to academics, students' spiritual lives are also disrupted as their mind, body, and soul seek safe connections (Stephens, 2020).

As researchers continue to explore student mental health, the college classroom has become a newer area of interest as it relates to trauma-informed care (Gross, 2020). Placing faculty at the forefront of students' academic experience means faculty are joining their student affairs counterparts on the front lines of student mental health care (Flaherty, 2021; Gallimore et al., 2019). How do faculty understand their role when it comes to caring for students' mental health in the midst of their existing roles as educators? Desiring to meet faculty in the unknown of

this question, this study sought to understand the experiences of faculty, specifically how student mental health concerns have affected their pedagogy.

Review of Relevant Literature

A review of the existing theological, educational, and psychological frameworks related to the impact of college student mental health concerns on faculty pedagogy endorses the need for a greater exploration and consideration of faculty experiences.

Theological Framework

The integration of faith and learning is what makes Christian liberal arts institutions unique in their educational model as faculty are encouraged to incorporate theological frameworks within their respective disciplines. Smith (2013) explained that a Christian university is held at the intersection of "two ecosystems," that of the Church and that of higher education. Imagining the work of Christian higher education as formative practice heightens the responsibility of faculty to engage this call with great intention. The significant integration of psychology with theology provides an opportunity for a holistic understanding of students, resonating with the intentional, whole-person education aims of Christian higher education.

Theological Anthropology

Viewing human development through a theological lens gives valuable insight to what makes Christian higher education pedagogy distinctly Christian. Theological anthropology is the biblical understanding of what it means to be human (Balswick et al., 2016; Harrison, 2010; Shults, 2003; Shults & Sandage, 2006). It affirms that "we are distinct and particular beings" (King, 2016, p. 223), all created in the *imago Dei,* providing a sense of unity, yet each human exudes their divine image through unique human identity. Humans are called to be in relationship with the divine and to reciprocate that relationship with others.

Faculty hold the opportunity to reciprocate the *imago Dei* by providing pedagogy focused on whole-person formation through their learning relationships with students (Dockery & Morgan, 2018; Kuh et al., 2005; Parks, 2000). Recognizing the spiritual lives of students, as integrated with their learning, names a distinctive factor of Christian higher education and the faculty who teach in such institutions. Shults and Sandage (2006) stated, "Theology can help us understand spiritual experience, transformation, questions of God, while psychology helps us to develop

models of spirituality that have empirical validity with respect to experiential and relational dynamics of the lived world" (p. 155). To be able to connect the lived experience with the spiritual through such areas of study requires a culmination of psychology, theology, and relationality within the classroom, specifically between faculty and students. A guiding framework modeling this integration can be found in the concept of the reciprocating self.

Reciprocating Self

The concept of the reciprocating self provides a Christian framework for faculty and student learning relationships (Balswick et al., 2016; Shults & Sandage, 2006). Presented by Shults and Sandage (2006) as a developmental teleology, the reciprocating self models the understanding that "God's intention for human development is for us to become particular beings in relationship with the divine and human other" (p. 55). Christ reflects the perfect image of God (*imago Dei*), and in the reciprocating relationship, self and others can come to understand their blessedness as image bearers, too. For the purposes of this study, the reciprocating self helps to represent the theological value within Christian higher education of developing students holistically. Described in an educational framework, Palmer (1993) refers to the aim of whole-person education as "the goal of knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds" (p. 8). This notion of restoring or "reconstructing" students to whole beings represents a need for a psychological understanding—knowing how the mind, brain, and body play a role in restoring the whole person.

Psychological Framework

The mental health concerns of college students cover a broad range of experiences from anxiety to trauma. Additionally, students may hold different types of trauma, including examples such as generational trauma (Doucet & Rovers, 2010), collective trauma (Hirschberger, 2018), or secondary trauma (Gilbert-Eliot, 2020). Understanding the interruption caused by mental health concerns and trauma on a student's ability to learn helps frame the need for further research in how institutions can best aid faculty as they guide students' learning experiences in the classroom.

Mental health is the phrase used to describe an individual's well-being as it relates to social, physical, and emotional engagement with their world, including mind-body regulation (Galderisi et al., 2015; The Mayo Clinic, 2022). Also included in mental health is the experience of trauma.

Trauma affects a person's nervous system, altering their brain and body function (Badenoch, 2008; Dana, 2018; Siegel, 1999), adding to the interruption of learning. The brain's response to trauma leads an individual to feel overwhelmed, with a strong sense of loss of control over their body (Yoder, 2005). Traumatic experiences create a sense of continual risk, causing one's body to shut down emotional responses. The body then begins to exhibit the unfelt experience of these emotions through symptoms such as neck pain, digestive problems, sleeping issues, headaches, and more (van der Kolk, 2014).

These factors present hurdles for student learning on college campuses (Bohannon et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). In a study researching the mental health landscape of university students (N = 43,048), researchers found that 52% of students have indicated receiving treatment for a mental health condition on campus (Eisenberg et al., 2018). Because of their findings, the same study recommended campuses intentionally include mental health care into daily campus life for the student, including "integrating consideration of mental health with academic advising or academic curricula in creative new ways" (p. 85). With the increase in student trauma exposure, discussions about faculty involvement in student mental health training and care have entered the higher education field as faculty seek guidance (Gallimore, et al., 2019; Doughty, 2018; Flaherty, 2021). Therefore, the reciprocal relationship between professor and student may serve as a needed safe connection for students to begin sharing their stories, which may lead to healing (Herman, 1997).

Educational Framework

Exploring the significance of pedagogy for Christian higher education provides an opportunity to further understand the valuable role faculty hold within these institutions. Boyer (1990) wrote of the important practice for good teachers to be always reviewing their pedagogy and intentionally planning their procedures in line with their subject matter. Further affirming this practice, Bartlett (2005) compared the banking model of education to a critical pedagogy model. In the banking model of education, the teacher "deposits" knowledge to students. Contrasting this model, critical pedagogy invites students and teachers to learn together "through dialogical theory of praxis and knowledge as a revised relationship between teacher and student" (Bartlett, 2005, p. 345).

Returning to the value of the reciprocating self for faculty-student interactions in Christian higher education classrooms, the nature of the critical pedagogy model shared by Bartlett (2005) represents the shift

away from pedagogy as simply knowledge-based. There is a formation component integrated. Smith (2013) named the shift in detail by stating how "pedagogies of desire form our habits, affections, and imaginations, thus shaping and priming our very orientation to the world. If Christian education is going to be holistic and formative, it needs to attend to much more than intellect" (p. 13). If pedagogy serves as a home for the praxis of integrated faith and learning, faculty serve as the inhabitants of the home, providing the lived experience of pedagogy. Students' responses to and interactions with faculty are critical to pedagogical effectiveness (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Cox & Orehovec, 2007).

Relational Pedagogy

Helping to provide pragmatic context for the ways in which pedagogy can positively influence student faculty interactions, Howard (2016) integrated the value of relationships for pedagogy in his transformationist model of pedagogy. This model postulates that at the core of pedagogy, an educator must hold the triad of 1) knowing self, 2) knowing students, and 3) knowing practice. Presented as a triangle, each point of the triangle represents an intersection for which Howard (2016) named a "doorway" for learning. At the intersection of knowing self and knowing students is the "doorway of relationship" (Howard, 2016). In the transformationist pedagogy, an educator seeks to establish a safe connection with their students, including an element of vulnerability in their teaching (Brantmeier, 2013). A student's mental health concern or trauma may prevent them from receiving the faculty's attempt to establish a safe connection through a transformationist model of pedagogy (Copeland et al., 2021), giving rise to an opportunity for pedagogical mismeetings. A mismeeting occurs when the educator seeks to impose their ideas onto the learner rather than offering openness toward the learner as "someone that is in actual being and someone that is in a process of becoming" (Buber, 1988, p. 72). The demands placed on faculty by their evolving roles in college student well-being prompts a curiosity to understand the faculty teaching experience, specifically as it relates to faculty observations of student mental health as presented in the classroom learning environment.

Methodology

A grounded theory approach was applied through a qualitative interview process. The particular method of grounded theory was chosen based on the theory's founding principle where the researcher is

"questioning their place in research texts" (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 7). As there was not a significant amount of existing research on the topic of faculty pedagogy in relation to student mental health, the researcher was seeking to find a place within the research to add a contribution in the absence of information.

Participants included 13 faculty members from four Christian campuses representing a range of teaching experience as summarized in Table 1 (individual and institution names are pseudonyms).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Institution	Department	Year range at current institution
Kate	Sepia College	Religion Studies	20–25 years
Lucy	Sepia College	Education	15–20 years
Dan	Sepia College	Communication	30+ years
John	Sepia College	Humanities	15–20 years
Kim	Indigo University	Nursing	5–10 years
Nicole	Indigo University	Nursing	5–10 years
Molly	Lavender University	Communication	5–10 years
Sam	Lavender University	Education	15–20 years
Anne	Magenta University	History	1–5 years
Dexter	Magenta University	Social Science	5–10 years
Gwen	Magenta University	Sociology	5–10 years
Helen	Magenta University	Social Science	20–25 years
Louise	Magenta University	Nursing	15–20 years

To understand the experiences of faculty members teaching in Christian college classrooms, the researcher followed a constructed interview script to conduct the 60 to 90 minute individual Zoom interviews. Through an inductive analysis process of transcription, coding, and theming, the content of the interviews was analyzed to discover outcomes for the study. An interrater reviewed the initial coding produced by the researcher for "negating any bias that any one individual might bring to outcomes" (Creswell, 2012, p. 161). Additionally, the NVivo (Version 12) software was used for storing transcriptions and tracking

researcher notes in an organized manner, allowing for greater reliability within the coding and theming process. It is evident that college student mental health continues to be a rising concern on many Christian college campuses (Bohannon et al., 2019; Cox et al., 2015; Davidson, 2017). Therefore, it was assumed that participants were more likely than not to have encountered, with at least one student, the effect of a student's mental health on the faculty member's teaching experience.

Discussion of Findings

As a result of this qualitative process, four main themes arose from the participant interviews in connection to the original research question exploring the impact of college student mental health on faculty pedagogy. The themes presented are: the value of relationships for promoting student well-being; lowered engagement by students experiencing mental health challenges; the increased need for mental health-related accommodations; and the impact of faculty well-being on classroom practice. Each theme holds within it a connection to the faculty's experience of pedagogy as impacted by students' mental health.

The Value of Relationship for Promoting Student Well-Being

The value of relationship within faculty pedagogy aligns the whole person education model of engaging students' development beyond academics (Palmer, 1993; Smith, 2009). Recalling the concept of the reciprocating self (Balswick et al., 2016; Harrison, 2010; Shults & Sandage, 2006), the relationship between faculty and students serves as a priority for faculty. As evidenced by participants' examples, faculty at Christian institutions seem to hold a dedicated place within their pedagogy for getting to know their students so that they can best help them learn while getting to know them as people. Louise, a nursing professor, shared, "I would say the biggest thing that's kept me in the role is the relationships that I've been able to build with students that extend beyond their graduation."

A pedagogical value within Christian higher education is the honoring of the other in the learning relationship between faculty and student. Viewing one another through the lens of the *imago Dei* helps to reaffirm this relational value, especially as faculty model this practice (Dockery & Morgan, 2018). This reciprocal lens of naming self and other as made in the image of God emphasizes the mutual valuing of the other and encourages student and faculty to humanize one another, allowing a "pedagogy of vulnerability" to form (Brantmeier, 2013). This concept begins

to diverge from the traditional literature on pedagogy by proposing that teachers, or faculty, share about their life experiences with their students for the purposes of creating a "lived curriculum" within the classroom, making the co-learning relationship more personal.

Lowered Student Engagement with Pedagogy

The theme of lowered student engagement accentuated the valuing of relationships as the lack of engagement in class caused high levels of concern for faculty. Referring back to the idea of a theological anthropology as it relates to pedagogy in Christian higher education, Buber's (1988) explanation of "meeting" and "mismeeting" within human interactions proves a beneficial comparison for this theme. Expressing the tone of this theme, Molly, having just shared about the return of her students to campus after their pandemic remote learning semester, stated, "I think we're still living in a bit of the residue of [the pandemic]." The residue in Molly's comment refers to the dynamics experienced by all participants of still living in a pandemic at the time of this study and the continuing need to adjust pedagogy for quarantine learning situations. Molly's discouragement models the felt experience of a mismeeting in the reciprocated relationship as Molly was offering opportunity but the students were not present to the relationship to receive, causing a break in the reciprocating nature of the relationship in this instance. This theme is significant for faculty as they continue to adjust to the implications of the pandemic on students' educational journeys.

Mental Health Accommodations within Pedagogy

The rise of college student mental health concerns existed prior to the start of the pandemic (Bohannon et al., 2019; Cox et al., 2015; Davidson, 2017), and the pandemic experience seems to have accelerated the trend (McMurtie, 2022). Within this study, faculty indicated that student mental health most influenced their pedagogy through increased requests for accommodations in the classroom and with assignments. Participants demonstrated a connection with Herman's (1997) trauma healing framework, specifically the act of remembrance, as they connected with the sentiment that students seem more likely to share about their personal lives, specifically their mental health, through the sharing of their stories with faculty. Representing this theme in his personal account of students sharing openly about their mental health, Dan shared, "I don't know yet whether there's actually more [mental health needs] than there was in the past, or whether it's become less of a stigma to talk about how they're struggling."

The act of students sharing about their mental health or trauma to a faculty member may be both an affirmation of the trust established between co-learners as well as an attempt to seek healing by telling their stories (Allender & Loerzel, 2021; Herman, 1997). Faculty, in turn, may provide wisdom in guiding the student to make meaning of their trauma as "story makes sense of chaos" (Simmons, 2001). Receiving a student's story and providing support through connection to proper resources is a common model of the reciprocating self at work as the student is heard and the faculty practices boundaries of self while still caring for the student.

Faculty Well-Being

Arising from participants' personal reflections on their teaching experiences, the theme of faculty well-being holding significant impact on pedagogy became evident. Factors also identified within this theme were the importance of boundaries for the faculty role, specifically as it relates to time management and student care; expressions of exhaustion in the role; and a theme of encouragement stemming from the support of colleagues for their well-being. Gwen elaborated about the implications of faculty well-being on the student experience in sharing, "I think students get the short end of the stick ultimately. Because [faculty] are just trying to survive. Going back to mental health, it is the opposite of what [students] need." For the purposes of this study, Gwen's remark draws attention to the potential "mismeetings" (Buber, 1988) taking place with current faculty expectations.

Scope and Limitations

Indicative of a broad statement such as the search within Christian higher education for a sustainable method for caring for student mental health, this study requires a specific scope in order to remain consistent with the research topic and provide a focused research process. In order to keep the study focused, the researcher placed a boundary within the possible avenues of the study. The intent of the study was to pursue faculty experiences specific to college student mental health as it manifests in the Christian college classroom and the impact of that intersection on faculty pedagogy. Therefore, the researcher did not include deeper study specifically on the topic of COVID-19 on faculty pedagogy. As an anticipated theme that did arise in faculty responses, COVID-19 was a focal point of participants' responses, especially as the interviews were conducted during the ongoing pandemic. The researcher offered the data as presented, being true to the qualitative process, but did not spend

extended research efforts on exploring COVID-19 experiences or implications as related to the study.

In addition to naming the areas for which the researcher limited their scope of study in order to provide a deeper, more focused research response, there also needs to be an acknowledgement of the limitations presented in the research design. Conducting qualitative interviews allowed for a thorough understanding of faculty experiences but presented a limitation as it only allowed for the exploration of a small population of narratives compared to the possibilities of a quantitative research study, which could provide more of a breadth of responses from a larger participant pool. However, the narratives of the participants provide depth and insight to the intended research topic.

Implications for Practice

Drawing from the themes identified above, the recommendations provided begin with restoring faculty well-being as well as offering trauma-informed training to equip faculty responding to students' mental health concerns in the classroom. As evidenced in their deep care for students, faculty participants named their students as the primary reason they have remained in their careers as professors. If faculty are feeling "exhausted," "fatigued," or "burnt out," how can they continue to care holistically for their students? Faculty, like students, require encouragement and opportunities to practice self-care for their own well-being (Freytag & Shotsberger, 2022). Two recommendations are offered: equip faculty through trauma-informed practices and find opportunity to create "hearth spaces" (Parks, 2000) on campus.

The first recommendation encourages institutions to equip faculty through trauma-informed care and training. While there is significant research and established practice of trauma-informed classrooms for K–12 educational levels, there are fewer offerings for the college student experience. Making an important distinction, Stephens (2020) highlighted the necessity of a campus-wide effort when it comes to becoming a trauma-informed campus. A campus-wide approach requires faculty to serve as partners with all other offices attempting to support a student in their response to effects of trauma in their life (Doughty, 2018; Hoch et al., 2015; Stephens, 2020). As student affairs professionals already engage in the work of supporting student mental health, how might this profession become co-learners with faculty in the effort to support student mental health across campus? As faculty seek to engage their students, the ability to create safe spaces, or hearth spaces, and connections with

campus partners provides a helpful way forward for faculty pedagogy (Carrere & Kinder, 2021; Olson, 2014; Phillips et al., 2020).

A hearth space, described by Parks (2000), captures the essence of a created space for "humanizing practices." The importance, particularly in pandemic processing, of allowing faculty opportunities within their work to "keep life human" (Parks, 2000, p. 154) serves as an avenue for faculty to engage the reciprocating self, mirroring the *imago Dei* to one another as colleagues for the benefit of sustaining faculty well-being. It is important to provide space and opportunities for faculty to remember they are created in divine likeness and be reminded of their call to teaching. A step toward such an offering can be inspired by the act of re-membering (Palmer, 2007). In order to receive the reality of student mental health implications, faculty are invited to do their own re-membering through "recovering identity and integrity, and reclaiming the wholeness of our lives" (Palmer, 2007, p. 21). As curricular and co-curricular professionals continue to navigate the landscape of college student mental health collaboratively, the need for modeling holistic self-care presents as essential in the enduring work of developing whole persons during the college years.

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