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ASPIRE: Formation of Pre-service Teachers through Leadership, Community Engagement and Retreat Training

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Abstract: This article explores the experiences of pre-service teachers who are involved in a program promoting leadership, community engagement and retreat training. It initially presents a review of the literature on the significant links between teacher commitment and quality teaching. It then describes how four significant dispositions: care, leadership, service and reflective practice, are embedded in a program entitled 'ASPIRE' at The University of Notre Dame Australia. The program is designed to assist pre-service teachers in recognising and developing their sense of teaching vocation. An outline of the research methodology is provided. Specifically, the research is based on qualitative data derived from focus group interviews, personal reflections and feedback sheets from pre-service teachers currently participating in three aspects of the program: the Education Society, the Community Service-Learning Program and the Retreat Leaders Training Program. Participant reflections are then considered from each of these programs. The article highlights participant responses in two categories: motivation for involvement and benefits gained. From this discussion, the article affirms the necessity for purposeful experiences in the development of a sense of teaching vocation.

Introduction

A major challenge for teacher education is the formation of pre-service teachers who possess a deep sense of their vocation as teachers. 'Vocation' describes work that is of service to others, while at the same time providing people with a sense of their identity and meaning. Within teaching, vocation highlights teachers' dispositions, attitudes, beliefs and values more than it does methods of teaching (Hanson, 1995). This is not to imply that methods and techniques of teaching are unimportant. They are critical to any viable career in education. However, quality teaching involves so much more (Rowe, 2004). This article seeks to explore and describe the experiences of pre-service teachers at The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) who are involved in a formation program designed to enhance their commitment to teaching as a vocation. This formation program complements the teacher education courses in the School of Education.

Literature review

The literature review outlines the rationale and means for assisting pre-service teachers in developing a stronger sense of commitment to teaching. Firstly, the review

outlines the connection between teacher commitment and quality teaching. Secondly, it discusses how this commitment is intrinsically linked with the development of both professional attributes and personal dispositions. Thirdly, the review describes how pre-service teachers may develop a stronger sense of vocation through reflection on their voluntary involvement in purposive activities. Lastly, the review focuses on how this form of experiential learning can raise the awareness of pre-service teachers about their professional identity and personal integrity.

Teaching today is seen not only as a profession but also as a vocation (Durka, 2002). Whereas a profession is concerned about competency, qualifications and working conditions, a vocation represents intrinsic motivations or dispositions toward people or actions (Hansen, 1995). A vocation in teaching is a deeply-felt personal calling that takes time to awaken and develop. Such a calling is “sustained by a sense that the work of teaching is an activity whose meaning is larger than the sum of its parts” (Durka, 2002, p. 7). The quality of the many activities performed by teachers for students is related to the commitment teachers possess. The formation of teachers toward a vocation in teaching is seen as a necessary adjunct to quality teaching (Hansen, 1995). The Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education (2007) stated that:

Quality teaching requires that those entering the profession are committed to their vocation, have a strong academic grounding relevant to their field of teaching, including theories of teaching and learning, and have the capacity to grow in knowledge and skill as they promote growth in their students (para. 3.1).

The statement suggests that, among other factors, quality teaching is related intimately to the commitment of teachers at both the personal and professional levels. Pre-service teachers are expected not only to have the knowledge and competence to teach well but also to possess a strong commitment to the profession (Department of Education and Training, 2004, p. 6; Teaching Australia, 2009, p. 3) and to all students they teach in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2001, p. 6). Quality teachers with a strong commitment to teaching make the best teachers. Teaching Australia (2009, p. 1) in its case for specialised standards in the teaching profession states, “Research has clearly and convincingly established that good teachers make a difference to students’ life chances and the best teachers make the most difference”. Furthermore, without a commitment toward teaching, there is the possibility that when pre-service teachers graduate, they may become overwhelmed by the stress of teaching (Kwong, 2004) rather than being sustained by a highly-developed sense of altruism (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007, p. 35).

A commitment to teaching relies upon the identification and development of a positive disposition toward the well-being of students (Australian Government House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002, pp. xxii, 134-136). Such an observation has led to a call for teacher education to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to assist them in creating a positive rapport with students. Pre-service teachers need to experience and implement a “...positive, encouraging, caring and trusting learning ambience where the relationship(s) between teacher and student, and student and student, are the priority” (Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty & Nielsen, 2009, p. 19). A good teacher is a person who can not only teach well but also understands students and engages positively with them (Sykes, 2003; Hartnett & Kline, 2005, p. 10; Lovat & Toomey, 2007).

A positive rapport is also reliant upon teachers living what they teach. The introduction of the National Values Framework (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005) and the ‘core shared values’ of the WA Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998) have placed a greater onus on teachers to exemplify, as well as to teach explicitly a commitment to active Australian citizenship. This commitment

includes the modelling of values such as care, respect, justice, teamwork and civic and environmental responsibility. There is the possibility that a disparity occurs between the values of pre-service teachers and the values espoused in the Curriculum Framework (Reynolds, 2001). The disparity between teacher identity and integrity can have a significant effect on whether students adopt the desired values. There is the danger that teacher education courses may be failing to recognise and remedy such a situation.

A commitment to the vocation of teaching invites the development of important dispositions to be achieved in teacher education programs. The notion of ‘disposition’ is used here to refer to “those actions that are voluntarily undertaken in response to a set of existing conditions that are identified as relevant...” (Arnstine, 1990, p. 233). Inherent in this is the understanding that it is possible to focus activities and resources toward the ‘cultivation’ of a disposition. As Arnstine (1990, p. 234) states:

to cultivate [deliberately] a disposition as an educational aim is to expect that knowledge and skills relevant to its exercise will be acquired, that conditions for its exercise will be recognized and selected, that actions embodying the disposition will be cultivated and practiced, and that the consequences of activities involving the disposition will be felt and recognized.

Crucial to the attainment of a disposition is the voluntary participation of the person in a “purposive activity” that is seen to be worthwhile (Arnstine, 1990, p. 235). The report by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education (2007) suggests that teacher education programs need to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to cultivate positive dispositions.

By cultivating such dispositions, pre-service teachers can create a synergy between competence and a calling to teach (Hartnett & Kline, 2005, p. 13). This synergy can lead to a sense of fulfilment and passion for the work done. In particular, Michelac (2002, p. 6) proposes that “purposive activities” or opportunities reflect “the journey inward toward our inner teacher, toward greater pedagogical certainty, [which] is inherently spiritual” and requires “...spiritual educational experiences [that] should be augmented and extended” (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006, in VanZanten Gallagher, 2007, p. 33). These activities can become spiritual experiences because they connect to what Palmer (2008, II Spirituality in Education, para. 7) refers to as “identity and integrity” or, in the Christian tradition, as the spirit, heart or soul of a person.

To develop dispositions toward a sense of vocation in teaching (Palmer, 2008, III Can We Educate the Soul? para. 2), pre-service teachers need to be able to connect to their inner life or spirituality. To make a connection, reflections on their actions are necessary to explore the deeper or ‘core’ dimension of the self. These “core reflections” can help integrate the dispositions toward a vocation in teaching (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, p. 53). Palmer (1997) refers to an integration of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of identity and integrity. What pre-service teachers learn about how to teach, the positive relationships they can develop with young people, and their yearning to make a difference come together to form a ‘good teacher’. As Palmer emphasises, “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 1997, Teaching Beyond Technique, para. 2). This identity and integrity or ‘self-efficacy’ allows teachers to become “more real” to students and have the capacity to teach with authority (Palmer, 1997, Teaching and True Self, Para. 3; Listening to the Teacher Within, para. 16). Ethridge (2006, p. 62) also points out that, “through experiential learning the students [pre-service teachers] faced their fears, learned from their mistakes and became effective advocates”.

Chater (2005, p. 251) notes that, while many novice teachers have a predisposition toward becoming a teacher, this predisposition seems to be more about their feelings toward the idea of teaching rather than a reflection of their actual experiences. He believes that without the necessary experiences and support structures to ground their perceptions, students could later develop “illusionless cynicism” (Chater, 2005, p. 253). Palmer (2008, IV A Concluding Scientific Postscript) emphasises the point:

If you educate teachers’ hearts and souls, they deepen their relations with students, restore community with colleagues, embrace new leadership roles on behalf of authentic educational reform, and renew their sense of vocation instead of dropping out (para.1).

There is ample evidence to suggest that it is the personal and professional attributes of the teacher that determine the quality of learning achieved by students (Stronge, 2002; Rowe, 2004). Effective teaching and learning takes place where social cohesion and empathy, led by the teacher, exist in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2001). If teachers are to lead the development of such an environment, then they themselves should have had opportunities to extend their qualities of care and leadership (Arnstine, 1990, p. 239). The end result is that quality teaching is enhanced because pre-service teachers have a heightened sense of their commitment to the profession.

Facilitating a sense of vocation

The School of Education at the Fremantle campus of UNDA provides teacher education courses in the early childhood, primary and secondary teaching areas. To complement the professional competencies acquired through these courses, a program entitled ASPIRE (Figure 1) assists pre-service teachers in recognising and enhancing their sense of vocation towards teaching. The program focuses on four key dispositions to enhance pre-service teachers’ commitment toward a vocation in teaching: care, leadership, service and reflective practice. These dispositions are embedded in purposeful activities available to pre-service teachers that include leadership development, community engagement and retreat training. The program offers pre-service teachers the choice to become involved in activities they perceive as being valuable. They have the chance to explore, clarify and own these dispositions before graduating and applying for teaching jobs.



Figure 1 Qualities of the ASPIRE program

Leadership development – the Education Society

Providing leadership opportunities and experiences for pre-service teachers is critically important. Schools need teachers who are prepared to lead, who know how to lead, both as teacher-leaders (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009) and in designated leadership positions, and who can lead with a servant heart. Quality leadership in schools does matter. It affects school outcomes, such as students' social and academic achievements, teachers' performance and school-community relationships (Zammit, et.al, 2007). While leadership is not a magic solution to improving schools, there is little doubt that outstanding leadership is a key characteristic of outstanding schools (Beare, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1997).

A specific leadership activity available to UNDA pre-service teachers through the ASPIRE Program is participation in the Education Society. The Education Society is an elected tertiary student body whose membership is open to all pre-service teachers enrolled in the School of Education, Fremantle campus. The objects of the Education Society are to improve the professionalism of Education students; help Education students to meet new people and their future colleagues; give a sense of unity and voice for Education students; represent Education students and the School of Education, Fremantle campus; organise informal and formal social events to enhance interaction and social skills; and to participate in social justice outreach projects at the local, State and international levels. The Executive of the Society's Committee consists of the President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. Other elected members include a representative from the second, third and fourth year students; primary, secondary and early childhood representatives; a publications officer; and a social events officer. Ordinary membership is also available. The Society is mentored by members of the faculty from the School of Education.

The leadership model underpinning the operation of the Education Society at UNDA is that of 'servant leadership'. Philosophically, servant leadership begins with the natural

feeling that one wants to serve first, and then to lead. At the heart of such leadership is the wish to ensure that other people's highest priority needs are being met (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership emphasises service to others over self-promotion and self-interest. Servant leaders aim to enhance the personal growth of organisational members and improve the organisation through a combination of teamwork, shared decision making and ethical behaviour (Kelley & Williamson, 2006). There are, moreover, sound reasons for promoting servant leadership as an appropriate model of leadership for pre-service teachers. Not the least is the fact that servant leadership is a viable model of leadership for teachers and school administrators (Kelley and Williamson, 2006; Crippen, 2005).

Service-learning – community engagement

While definitions of service-learning vary somewhat among those who embrace it, at its core, service-learning is a form of experiential learning that employs service as its 'modus operandi'. The learning process is drawn from lessons of experience in performing the service work. Most service falls into the categories of welfare, empowerment and advocacy, involving such community organisations as hospitals, schools, nursing homes, day care centres and facilities for those with disabilities (Levison, 1994). From the perspective of those performing the service, there are three basic components to effective service-learning: firstly, there must be efficient preparation, which includes setting objectives for skills learned or issues to be considered; secondly, students need to be mentored while performing the service; and thirdly, student experiences should be analysed through a process of reflection and de-briefing (Lavery & Richards, 2007). There is also the important component of reciprocity between those serving and the person or group being served. In particular, those being served must control the service provided and define what the service tasks will entail. It is critical that the needs and dignity of those being served be respected at all times (Jacoby, 1996).

All secondary pre-service teachers at UNDA undertake a compulsory service-learning unit as part of their degree or graduate diploma. The unit aims to develop a culture of serving others, to prepare young people for service leadership and to promote Christian/citizenship values by attending to specific needs of the community, especially those of the underprivileged. As part of the unit, pre-service teachers complete 12 hours of community engagement. The service-learning unit utilises a threefold process of preparation, mentoring and reflection. Inherent in the unit is a strong sense of promoting the dignity of all who are served. Participation in the ASPIRE program requires pre-service teachers to complete additional hours of service, together with further reflection in the form of group discussion. Inherent in the service-learning component of ASPIRE is leadership development. By taking part in service-learning, pre-service teachers are encouraged to develop into leaders who take initiative, solve problems, work as a team and demonstrate their abilities while and through helping others (Kaye, 2004). Moreover, participation in service-learning endorses strongly the idea of leadership as service.

Reflective practice – Retreat Leaders Training Program

Pre-service teachers are expected to develop professional reflective practices throughout their training. They evaluate how their lessons have progressed, the way in which they have motivated and engaged students in learning and their professional understanding of the curriculum (McLeod & Reynolds, 2003, pp. 52-53). However, Palmer (2002, pp. 4-5) insists that there is another, more profound reflective practice that teachers need to develop:

the one that discerns a teacher's identity and integrity in connection with a sense of vocation. A commitment to teaching means recognising that:

Vocation does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfil the original selfhood given me at birth by God (Palmer, 2002, p. 10).

For pre-service teachers to be in touch with their inner selves requires finding opportunities to reflect not only on 'what they do' but also 'why they do it' and 'where to next'? These reflections are essential (what was called earlier as core reflection) to pre-service teachers in clarifying their actions and decisions about teaching. Groome (2001, pp. 161-162) refers to such reflections on actions as "praxis". Praxis is a form of reflective practice that allows a person to examine his or her life through contemplation, to find expression for that reflection and to imagine possibilities for the future (Groome, 2001, p. 164). The process has the potential to assist pre-service teachers to evaluate and re-evaluate their sense of purpose in teaching.

One of the ways of providing the time and psychological space to reflect is to participate in a retreat, a time and place given over for individuals to be alone or to be in a community to consider their future (Debuchy, 1911). The Courage to Teach retreat program (Center for Courage and Renewal, 2006-2008), based on the work of Parker Palmer, provides such opportunities for teachers to reflect on their vocation through the use of stories, poetry and writings from a range of religious traditions in a number of group and personal settings. Korthagen and Vasolos (2005, p. 53) make the point that there are a number of levels or layers of reflection. The outer personal layers of a teacher (such as 'how am I going to do this?') interact with the inner layers (such as 'why am I doing this?'). The tension between these two layers (professional identity and vocation) requires awareness and, later, resolution, for pre-service teachers. A retreat that allows pre-service teachers the opportunity to reflect on their teaching has the capacity to build their "experiential knowledge" and complement their competence as teachers (Hackett, 2007).

As part of ASPIRE, the Retreat Leaders Training Program (RLTP) is offered to pre-service teachers in their graduating year with a two-fold purpose in mind. Firstly, the program helps them explore their own personal and professional outlooks toward teaching as a profession (vocation aspect). As a way of immersing participants in a retreat experience, activities focus on discussing and reflecting about why teaching is important to them. Secondly, the program provides participants with the knowledge and skills to organise and facilitate retreat experiences with school students (identity aspect). Tullio (2006, p. 4) notes that today many teachers in Catholic schools have little, if any, prior professional preparation for participating in or facilitating school retreats. This program seeks to remedy at least part of this situation. As retreats are often part of a school's broader Religious Education program, included within the retreat program is a significant faith paradigm. Participants are invited to explore and experience this paradigm through discussion, reflection, ritual and prayer. A principle of the program is that pre-service teachers be immersed in a retreat experience to understand and empathise with school students about such experiences.

Methodology

Three methods of data collection were used to explore the experiences and perceptions of pre-service teachers involved in ASPIRE. Firstly, there were three 30-minute qualitative focus group interviews in each of the ASPIRE program components. The focus groups consisted of (a), five pre-service teachers from the Executive of the Education

Society; (b), four secondary pre-service teachers who had completed at least 20 hours of service; and (c), four pre-service teachers who acted as leaders from the RLTP. The 13 participants were selected because of their keen involvement in a particular aspect of ASPIRE, either as a volunteer (Education Society, RLTP), or because they significantly exceeded the stipulated requirements (service-learning). Secondly, written personal reflections were received from five leaders of the Education Society. They were asked to comment on the ways in which their involvement in the Society had influenced, if at all, their attitudes, style and approach to teaching. Thirdly, anonymous feedback sheets were received from 30 participants in the RLTP. The feedback sheets had five open-ended questions inquiring about what was learnt and what was valued by the participants. Permission to use these reflections and feedback was granted by the respondents and, apart from the feedback sheets, the pre-service teachers were selected based on purposive sampling.

The focus group interviews were audiotaped, and notes taken. The same seven questions were put to each group: students were asked about their motivation for becoming involved; what they learnt or gained from the experience; in what ways the experience had affected them personally; if the experience had helped them professionally; what advice or support had assisted their development as a teacher; what aspects of their experience had influenced their outlook toward teaching; and what suggestions they would make about involvement in such experiences. These questions were designed to enable participants to reflect more deeply upon and articulate their experiences (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Key themes were identified from the interviews. The data from other sources were used to interrogate the themes further and to clarify the pre-service teachers' experiences.

Findings

Where possible, the words used by the participants are denoted by quotation marks and quotations.

Education Society

The participants highlighted three reasons for joining the Education Society. Firstly, they wished to be "active members" of the student body. They wanted to "enhance" their university experience by becoming "involved", by making "a contribution", and not simply being "passive". The Education Society provided a means to do this. Secondly, they were seeking a sense of community: that is, they wished to connect and network with a range of people - fellow students, lecturers and members of the wider teaching community. This feeling of community was especially important for the two participants who were just out of secondary school and, initially, knew no-one in the School of Education. Moreover, one participant noted that such connections helped her reflect on whether or not teaching was her true profession. Thirdly, participants highlighted a strong sense of wanting to serve others. Specifically, they commented on a desire to "do things" for the student body, such as social initiatives, professional development programs and social justice activities. Participants were particularly strong on the social justice component, commenting that social justice issues "give a focus" to their involvement.

Participants were quick to indicate the benefits of being involved in the Education Society. There was a strong sense of satisfaction in running events for the student body. Moreover, participants believed that they had developed a range of interpersonal and leadership skills. They commented that their experiences had led them to be more confident,

tactfully assertive and collaborative. They noted that involvement in the Education Society had forced them “to get out of the comfort zone”, and to “overcome their fears”. One participant highlighted how he had gained confidence through speaking to peers and people in “higher positions”. He now felt more confident in himself and his ability to interact with people. Another participant indicated that her teaching had been influenced by the leadership skills she had developed through the Education Society. She remarked that the confidence she had gained from being part of the student executive had strengthened her resolve in the classroom “to be organised, forward thinking and innovative”. A third participant commented on the importance of “good leadership”, noting that his experiences in the Education Society had taught him that leadership was not about being “bossy”. Rather, he now considered that effective leadership involved providing the right environment for people to convey and articulate their own ideas. He talked in terms of “listening and negotiating”, skills that he believed were essential for a teacher to be successful.

Community Service-Learning Group

The four participants, all of whom completed over 20 hours of service, typify the kind of community placements pre-service teachers at UNDA undertake: a mentoring program with a student in need (ward of the State); a community drop-in centre for marginalised people; an education support centre for children with special needs; and, a nursing home for the aged. The reason participants completed extra hours was an overriding sense of service to those less well off than themselves. There was a strong belief that their “small contributions” could make a difference in others’ lives. None of the participants found the service easy. A “frightening experience” was one initial observation. Yet all participants repeatedly commented on how much they enjoyed working and being with those at their placements, developing relationships with these people and helping whenever possible.

Participants were adamant that they gained appreciably from their community service. Notably, all emphasised that such gains were not the motivation for becoming involved in the program. Participants believed that they had become more perceptive of people’s needs. As such, they could appreciate the importance of “little things”, like just talking to someone, or sharing company, which can have such a strong impact on a person’s well-being, in particular, on those “rejected from society”. All highlighted the relationships and friendships they had made. Yet, as one participant powerfully remarked, there was so much more than even this. She commented on the “vulnerability” of the girl she worked with, how this teenager could “fall back” into a bad situation. What she found important, upon reflection, was that those they worked with “were real people”, not statistics, and so much can happen in their lives. It was a sentiment shared strongly by the others.

All four participants felt that their service experiences had helped them professionally. A key learning identified was the need to not judge people, but to go beyond the obvious and spend time to actually know who people are, their needs and hopes. As one participant noted, her service experiences had taught her to see beyond the projected image to who a person really was – that person’s “self identity”. A second participant reacted to this statement. He felt that a “really important thing in becoming a teacher” was gaining an appreciation that young people do have needs that “you just cannot see on face value but exist all the same”. Yet another participant observed that her service-learning experience had taught her the need to clearly identify her students as individuals, to know “who they are, how they got to where they are, and who they can become”. Participants also noted that they had learnt patience, the need for an “open mind” and the ability to listen. Perhaps the most significant learning, either personally or professionally that the participants identified, was the need to be genuine.

Finally, participants now wished to promote a sense of service in their own students when they began teaching themselves. They believed that they could not authentically foster this sense of service if they had not undertaken the service-learning program.

Retreat Training Group

The retreat training group members were asked what attracted them to opt for the RLTP. The overwhelming response was the gaining of knowledge and skills in developing school retreats. They saw the program as offering a valuable experience in managing an important aspect of the religious life of Catholic and independent schools, school retreats or reflection days. While the participants believed the teaching preparation program provided the knowledge and skills to teach religious education in the classroom, they were feeling hesitant about the ‘outside-the-classroom’ experiences these schools offered. Furthermore, the participants saw the RLTP as a means of gaining ‘an edge’ or advantage in applying for future teaching positions by including the certificate of participation as part of their curricula vitae.

The participants saw the program as offering them a “toolbox” or “bags of tricks” of ideas and strategies that they could use in and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, they commented positively on the “learning by doing” approach. Responses included: “inspired me to do the same”; “building a framework for purpose and trust through games and activities to help [school] students’ personal growth”; “journey with students like [the facilitators] did with us” by the organisational and facilitation skills exhibited by the facilitators; and ways to “use media to relate to children” to develop a greater sensitivity to their needs. Many remarked upon the links they saw between what they had learnt in the teacher education units and what they were actually doing in the program. They felt that they were putting into practice the theory they had learnt earlier. Most importantly, the participants believed that they were able to experience what their future students would experience. This experiential learning offered them a “confidence to get involved” and “know how to answer questions for myself” because they had already done the activity beforehand.

This growth in professional efficacy seemed to be linked with the personal insights the pre-service teachers gained from the program. As one participant commented, “Retreat opened my eyes to not only my vocation but everyone’s vocation as teachers”. For others, it was a realisation of why they wanted to teach:

[The program] gave me the opportunity to look back and look inside myself. It affirmed (or reaffirmed) that this path of teaching is really what I want to take. Listening to the testimonials of other students has provided a nice and sharp comparison to my own journey into teaching.

Participants felt that through opportunities for discussion, reflection and the subsequent challenges by other’s points of view, something seemed to “click”: “I was able to turn inwards and face aspects of my own life for which I’ve had *no* time in the hectic pace of life recently”. What they were doing was discovering a sense of vocation or calling: “I heard [another participant] say ‘it’s something inside you’”; “I wanted to have a strong commitment, a vocation rather than be a statistic”. Some participants also felt a strong sense of community or collegiality. They noticed that they came from different teacher preparation courses (early childhood, primary, secondary) yet they shared an important attribute: that is, they were a “good group of people” who felt “the same way about faith and teaching”. The participants believed that their peers who did not participate had missed out on a valuable

opportunity. As one participant concluded, the experience of the RLTP was an opportunity to “invest in yourself ... to give more to [school] students later on”.

Discussion

Participant responses can be broadly categorised under two main headings: (a), motivation for involvement in the activity; and (b), benefits gained from this involvement. Participants emphasised a strong desire to contribute in some way; whether it be representing the student body (Education Society), service to those less well off than themselves (Service-Learning Group), or using what they had learnt with their future students (Retreat Training Group). Other motivating factors included the desire to enhance their university experience by becoming active members of the student body, and to achieve a sense of community (Education Society); a strong conviction that their “small contributions” could make a difference in people’s lives (Service-Learning); a belief that the activity offered valuable experiences in managing an important aspect of school life and that these experiences enhanced their employability in private schools (Retreat Training Group).

Participants were adamant that they had developed personally and professionally from their involvement in the ASPIRE program. For instance, participants from the Education Society highlighted a feeling of satisfaction in running events for the student body, a sense of pride and confidence, along with improved leadership skills. Participants involved in Service-Learning commented that their experiences gave them an authenticity to foster service in future students. Further, they believed that they had become more socially aware of the plight of marginalised people, and, as a consequence, they were now more attuned to the needs of others: that is, they had a heightened sense of empathy. Participants from the RLTP were strong in the belief that the experience had helped each of them professionally through specific skill development. Like the Service-Learning participants, they also believed that their actual retreat experience had given them insights into what their future students would experience. Moreover, participants had emphasised a growing awareness that teaching was a vocation and not simply a profession.

Conclusion

The feedback from participants affirmed the importance of providing purposeful opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop positive dispositions. What was obvious in the participants’ reflections was a growing sense of commitment toward teaching and, especially, sensitivity toward the personal and learning needs of students in schools. Such a sensitivity is at the heart of the ASPIRE program, whereby pre-service teachers are able to sharpen their perspectives about teaching and students. ASPIRE contributes specific skills in leadership, community engagement and personal reflective practice that complements the professional training of pre-service teachers. However, ASPIRE is more than about developing technique. It is about opening the awareness of pre-service teachers to the realisation of their vocational potential. In particular, pre-service teachers realised the importance of care, leadership, service and reflective practice to their own teaching. What also became evident was that the opportunity to reflect on their ‘real-life’ experiences was critical. A program like ASPIRE that includes the chance for deeper reflection has the potential to allow pre-service teachers to purposefully assimilate and integrate their experiences, both personally and professionally. ASPIRE offers a range of activities to pre-service teachers that can enhance the dispositions required for quality teaching. Through the

program, pre-service teachers undertake an ‘apprenticeship’ in developing important dispositions such as care, leadership, and service. Such opportunities, coupled with purposeful reflection, can contribute to an awakening of and commitment to teaching as a vocation.

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