

2006

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Budlong, Cheryl (2006) "'Our Calling in Education": An Educator's Perspective," *Intersections*: Vol. 2006: No. 23, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2006/iss23/7>

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CHERYL BUDLONG

“Our Calling in Education”: An Educator’s Perspective

LET ME BEGIN my perspective as a professional in teacher preparation on “Our Calling in Education: A Lutheran Study” (Task Force on Education) with what I would call my “mental model.”

I did not attend Lutheran elementary or secondary schools. However, I did attend a stringent confirmation program in the Lutheran church. Many of you may have been raised with this same model: three hours a week on Saturday mornings for three years. Yes, I could prompt you on any part of Luther’s Small Catechism, and we could continue to recite it. I memorized Bible verses and was very emotional about the day I was confirmed. Another aspect of my heritage is that my grandfather, who emigrated from Germany, started a Lutheran church in Clinton, Iowa.

My college experience is a BA degree in middle school (then called junior high school) mathematics. I received a MA degree in secondary guidance and counseling—proving that I can in fact utilize both the right and the left sides of my brain. I taught mathematics and was a guidance counselor in Iowa and Illinois school districts. Then I stayed home for almost ten years raising four sons. My sons have attended five Lutheran Colleges (Wartburg, Gustavus Adolphus, Luther, Augsburg, and Pacific Lutheran). Three graduated from Lutheran colleges and two have master’s degrees from Catholic, yes, Catholic universities. One son is currently in the seminary to become a pastor, beginning his work at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary.

After what seemed like ages to get the boys in school, I returned to the university to obtain my doctorate in education with a cognate area in educational psychology. For the past twenty years, I have been a professor in the education department at

Wartburg College. This autobiography should attest to my commitment to Lutheran education ... and again provide a mental model for my comments to follow.

I am going to use the term “mental model” in many of the ideas discussed. What exactly is a mental model? Ruby Payne, an educational leader who has explored the concept of poverty and how it impacts learning, defines mental models as the way our brains hold abstract information. She provides a mental model—or picture—for us. Just as a computer has a file manager to represent software content, so does our human mind. We must have a shared understanding to be able to communicate. We must be able to use our minds to sort information—what is relevant and what is not, what is important and what is not. This is made possible through mental models. Again, definitively, mental models tell us structure, purpose, or patterns. How do we hold these structures, purposes, or patterns in our minds? Through stories, analogies, and drawings. It is how we explain things (Payne). Let’s put our mental models to work as we explore “Our Calling in Education.”

The Historical Model

The historical overview of Lutheran education was evident in this study. Martin Luther’s impact on education was profound. Let’s use the mental model of the Luther bobble-head figurine my son owns (remember he’s the one training for the ministry). Picture this—a wobbling head on a monk-like church leader. His head moves to affirm his belief in education: the importance that ALL could read the Bible (yes, his head moves affirmation), his commitment to the common good (again a bobble of

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affirmation) and his statement about “masks of God” (bobble once more). We need strong, knowledgeable, committed teachers, parents, and clergy to “train up our children in the ways they would go and when they are old they will not depart from these” (Prov. 23:6).

What memories do we have of colonial America? Can we picture what the colonists looked like? The clothes they wore? The plantations? The slaves? What about the role religion has played in schooling? Religion was the main purpose of education in colonial America. Children were taught to read primarily so that they could read the Bible and gain salvation. The first real textbook to be used in colonial elementary schools was the New England Primer. First copies of this book were printed in England in the 1600s. The Primer was a small book usually about 2 ½ x 4 ½ inches with thin wooden covers covered by paper or leather. It contained fifty to one hundred pages containing the alphabet, vowels, and capital letters. Next came words arranged from two to six syllables followed by verses and tiny woodcut pictures for each letter of the alphabet. The contents of the Primer reflect the heavily religious motive in colonial education (Johnson).

Private education has been extremely important in the development of America. Private schools carried on most of the education in colonial times. The first colleges—Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton—were private. Most early colleges were established to train ministers. Roman Catholic schools have been the most recognized of the religious schools. Over the past twenty-five years, enrollment in non-Catholic schools has grown dramatically while Catholic school enrollment has declined. Some Roman Catholic dioceses operate extremely large school systems, sometimes larger than the public school system in the same geographic area. The Chicago Diocese operates the largest Roman Catholic school system, enrolling approximately 150,000 students (Johnson).

Therefore, our mental models for the historical foundations of education are strong religiously based systems impacting the education of America’s children.

The Current Model

Next let’s look at the mental models of current educational initiatives. Many of us were “educating” or being educated ourselves in the 1980s. What mental model comes to our minds when we think of “A Nation at Risk” (National Commission on Excellence in Education)? The Reagan administration? Falling behind other countries in math and science? This report, commissioned by Reagan and authored primarily by Ted Bell, said we needed to fix education—longer school days, strengthening

teacher preparation and certification, more rigorous standards and curriculum, more testing, hard-nosed accountability with rewards and punishments—all this designed to make education stronger and remove the label of “our nation at risk” (Johnson).

Does this sound like what is happening today? Only a few years ago, *Goals 2000* was initiated during the first George Bush presidency and passed as legislation during Bill Clinton’s presidency. This legislation required states to develop by the end of the decade clear and challenging standards for student learning, to develop examinations based on the standards, and to report student progress.

By focusing on standards-setting and assessment at the state level, Sharon Robinson, the current leader of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, believed “Goals 2000 prompted states to establish more explicit commitments to the level of achievement expected of all children, including poor children served by Title I programs” (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education 52-53).

But our most recent legislation has become a common phrase for all parents, teachers, and community members: “Leave no child behind.” In January 2002, George W. Bush signed into law the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, called No Child Left Behind (and as some state leaders phrase it, NCLB). Marilyn Cochran-Smith (current president of the American Educational Research Association and professor at Boston College) gives her perspective on this legislation. This law’s purpose was “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to attain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education 68-69). Specifically, this law aims to improve the achievement of poor and other disadvantaged students by sending more federal resources to high-poverty and struggling schools. Testing in reading and math (with science to follow) is required of all third through eighth grade students, and schools are required to track test scores, report scores to parents, and disaggregate and publicize the results by race, gender, and other factors. The law requires that all schools make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward universal student proficiency in core subjects by 2013. Serious sanctions will be in place for schools that fail to do so.

The law also requires that students have teachers who are highly qualified—with at least a bachelor’s degree, full certification or a passing score on a teacher licensing exam, and demonstrated competence in the subjects they teach. One concern I and many others have on this particular NCLB component is the emphasis on content—with little mention of pedagogy or other professional knowledge and skills. A scarier part of current

research shows that disadvantaged students are least likely to have a fully qualified and experienced teacher. This may lead to labeling schools with high disadvantaged populations as “failing.” And what teacher would seek to teach in a “failing” school?

Another controversial aspect of the legislation is the emphasis on high-stakes testing. Remember the concept of “adequate yearly progress” (AYP)? This is the rate of improvement schools and all subgroups within the schools must make each year on the state tests. Schools that miss that mark may then be labeled “needs improvement” or “failing” and are subject to sanctions. Specialists in assessment often posit that these requirements are unrealistic and probably unreachable. Some statisticians suggest that almost all schools will fall short of targets over the next few years.

And what are the consequences for minority students? The NCLB goals include separate AYP targets for all subgroups of students. Districts must have at least ninety-five percent of their students taking the high-stakes tests and must make their yearly target toward one-hundred percent proficiency. The requirement to disaggregate the data and publicize the results may draw attention to the inequities in quality of education; some critics say that this is creating a “diversity penalty” for schools with the greatest diversity. In fact, the graduation rates of minority students may be exacerbated by the NCLB.

The Effective School

Beyond the current reform movements, let’s begin by exploring the research on what constitutes an effective school as posited by Lezotte, Edmonds, and many others (Johnson 446-48). Several characteristics and practices have been identified as hallmarks of effective schools. School district data demarcate high student achievement and the characteristics that contribute to this achievement.

Research into effective schools has identified the following components that contribute to high achievement:

- 1) The instructional program is goal directed—students know what is expected of them.
- 2) There is constant and consistent assessment and monitoring of student progress.
- 3) There is immediate feedback on student progress.
- 4) Instruction is appropriate to the learner.
- 5) Individual differences are given prime attention.
- 6) The program gives emphasis to basic skills—both academic and life skills.
- 7) There is continuity of instruction across grades.

- 8) The staff works together to provide common types of learning experiences in all parts of the curriculum.
- 9) There is effective grouping for instruction—groups are flexible and correspond to the task at hand and the individual differences by task.
- 10) Instructional time is organized to maximize the effectiveness of the “teachable moments.” Students experience different time modules for learning.
- 11) All lessons are adjusted to the students’ needs.
- 12) Teachers are concerned about the concept of “time on task” in learning.

The following environmental characteristics also impact effective schools.

- 1) There is a democratic administrative leadership—fairness in leadership and decision making promotes sound mental health among teachers and students.
- 2) There is an orderly, safe environment (social and academic)—free from fear.
- 3) There is clear, firm, and consistent discipline—students know what is expected of them and practice that policy.
- 4) There is a cooperative/family atmosphere.
- 5) There are few classroom interruptions.
- 6) There is parental involvement in student learning—parents are encouraged and expected to be partners in their child’s learning.
- 7) There are positive community relations—the school uses community resources and members in the learning process.
- 8) There are adequate activities and learning materials—budgets are appropriate to meet the objectives of the school in terms of materials, equipment, and (I will add) salaries.
- 9) There is a well kept school plant—attractive and kept at a high degree of maintenance.

Effective Schools and “Our Calling in Education”

How does “Our Calling in Education” correlate with what we know about effective schools and good teaching and learning?

One strong aspect of “Our Calling in Education: A Lutheran Study” is the focus on mission. Peter Drucker, a leader in business management and leadership, advocates the need for a strong mission statement to guide all that occurs within a business. In fact, our family has often articulated a family mission statement. This is true, also, in a school or church setting. It needs to be articulated

and shared with all stakeholders. The mission of the church's ministry in education is to "form and equip wise and faithful disciples who will live out their baptismal vocation both in the church and in the world" (Task Force on Education 20). A strength of this statement is the focus on knowledge, skills, and dispositions both within the Lutheran setting and throughout the world. These three—knowledge (what we think), dispositions (what we feel), and skills (how we act)—are the same three dimensions of performance-based teacher education professed by both state and national education organizations (NCATE, INTASC, etc.).

Another key term linked closely to mission is vision. Many of you have visited the Seattle Fish Market. Lundin, Christensen, and Paul have written an earlier book about the FISH philosophy and now a more current book entitled *Fish Sticks* (2003). These authors talk about "vision moments." These are the opportunities we have to reinforce or creatively extend our vision. If you can create a vision in a fish market, can we not in our Lutheran schools? Do we have a mental model of the Seattle fishmongers, tossing the fish from person to person, adding humor and joy in their vision for creating an experience of buying fish? I strongly recommend you watch the FISH videos to enhance this mental model. As educators within the Lutheran tradition, it is important to know clearly what we are doing and trying to create. We need to find the vision and communicate our goals. They encourage us to create an experience people value. Let me add one more thought from their books. They say that having deep conversations about the vision increases energy levels. The impact of conversations strengthens commitments and values. We are also able to find our place within the vision through conversations. Is this not what this conference is all about? We are not throwing raw fish from person to person, but we are throwing around ideas with fun and conversation to strengthen the Lutheran calling in education.

Another strong aspect of "Our Calling in Education" was the intentional articulation of vocation, or God's wondrous and awesome call. At Wartburg, we have a focus on Discovering our Calling. It is a language discussed often with new teachers. Is there a passion and commitment to education? This study obviously exemplifies such passion and commitment. As educators and church leaders, we need to find our calling in many venues. Through my consulting work, I have taught courses in finding our calling, although expressed in many different ways. More than twenty-five years ago, the Junior League, an organization that fosters volunteerism in communities, offered courses in Volunteer Career Development. The Lutheran church offers a course in GEMS (Gift Empowered Ministries). The curriculum used in these programs was focused on how to discern our calling—how to identify our strengths, and then use those strengths for the common good.

Once we have found our calling, we need to honor that calling. And that calling transfers to many different roles. As teachers, we are what the report terms "special servants of God" (Task Force on Education 33). We need to earn and demand respect. One challenge is pay—is the pay in Lutheran schools commensurate with this respect? We must guarantee that the pay is equitable in our Lutheran schools. Being a student is a calling. Do our students know and value this? Being a parent is a high calling. Being a parent is an obligation, as well as a calling. How about our calling as citizens? The government at both the state and local level has a new-found calling in education. And what about globally? Are children in Africa and other less-industrialized nations subject to the same equal opportunity to learn as American children? There is also an explicit calling—Does the media communicate the same calling and values that we want instilled in our children?

A third strong component permeating "Our Calling in Education" was the idea of context. Learning and teaching do not occur in a vacuum; many areas impact the education of our children. One influential area outlined in the study was diversity. God has designed us to be unique individuals and that is never more evident than in a classroom, particularly in a middle school. One young boy may be four foot something tall still playing with Legos and actions figures sitting beside a near six foot basketball player interested in the young girls also seated in the classroom. Think of the diverse societal conflicts mirrored in today's youth population: divorced homes, mixed parental cultures and races, teen pregnancies, drugs. Yet, God has made us all precious and important. This view of human dignity is espoused in this study. In the educational setting, this means no bullying, fairness to gay and lesbian students, equal opportunity for all to learn in our classroom, as well as access to technology and teaching strategies for the twenty-first century. The "digital divide" dare not separate the haves from the have-nots in our schools. Pluralism will always be evident in our schools, in one form or the other.

Financing is another context that will impact learning. This will vary based on the socioeconomic status of the communities. In fact, many researchers have stated that the socioeconomic status of the parents is the biggest predictor of success of students. What does this say to us as educators of the church in high-poverty areas? Remember our phrase—"equal opportunity for success for all." Not only is this a federal mandate, it is a Christian one as well.

"Our Calling in Education" also states that Lutheran education is relational. Malcolm Gladwell, the author of the current bestsellers *The Tipping Point* (2000) and *Blink* (2005), states that connectors are the social glue that holds society together.

He even goes so far as to say that the more acquaintances you have, the more powerful you are. As a little aside from this talk but from his research, Gladwell also states that power is in direct proportion to the amount of clothes you wear—the less clothes (with skin showing in this current fashion trend for young women) the less power. How is that for a little mental model picture at this moment? We have also heard of the game of “six degrees of separation”—I only wish I could give you the common example of Kevin Bacon, but I am movie-star deprived in my mental model.

One strong relationship that is so very critical in our schools is between teachers and students. I believe (as do the No Child Left Behind authors) that it is critical to have highly qualified, certified teachers in each classroom. If I did not hold this belief I would not commit my time and energies in teacher preparation. Teachers need those same three components identified earlier: knowledge of the content, dispositions or attitudes toward learning and children, and skills and strategies. We also know these roles are birelational. That is, the teachers are also learning from the children. Teachers must follow God’s law: they must act responsibly in human affairs. This is one reason Iowa and many other states require background checks on teachers. As the licensure officer at my institution, I have found that many more teachers lose their licenses for moral rather than content issues.

Parental involvement is another component of effective schools. Our document identifies parents as key people in children’s education. In fact these authors state that it is an obligation for parents to “create the structure and climate for children to grow” (Task Force on Education 33). In addition to parents, another key influence on children and their growth is their peers. There has been a long debate on the impact of nurture vs. nature on children’s growth and achievement. A current leader in the area of child development has recently made a strong statement about this debate. Judith Harris, a child development specialist, states the nurture assumption—the belief that what makes children turn out the way they do, aside from their genes, is the way their parents bring them up—is nothing more than a cultural myth (1998). She believes that what they experience outside the home, in the company of their peers, matters most. Parents don’t socialize children; children socialize children. If this is the case, the community within the school—and I would add the church—significantly impacts the lives of children. This may be a new mental model for many of us, but one not to discount.

Educational Psychology

Let’s take a small detour here to look at what an educational psychologist believes is important in educating our children (Slavin):

- 1) All students deserve an effective teacher.
- 2) All students learn in different ways. Variety must be evident in the curriculum and school activities for all children to succeed. This means that the teacher must be attuned to what works for each child in the classroom and then use the strategies, methods, and skills to enable the child to learn.
- 3) The curriculum must be developmentally appropriate. This means it is at the level where the child can learn. The psychologist Lev Vygotsky calls this their zone of proximal development—the level where the child learns with assistance from the teacher.
- 4) Learning is always changing. Can’t we all attest to this fact? Learning about child development becomes ever so important once we have our own children. In addition, we find what works well for one child may not work at all for another child. I know we have all experienced this with our own children.
- 5) Learning does not occur in isolation. Sometimes what we call the “hidden curriculum” in our schools teaches far more than the explicit curriculum. Can we teach children to be honest and truthful if we as teacher and parents are not honest and truthful ourselves?

Another psychologist, Jerome Bruner, talks about a spiral curriculum (Slavin). This means students must be exposed to a similar concept over and over again for the student to learn. So the first grade curriculum is reinforced in the second grade, and additional learnings are added to the initial learnings.

Students learn in familiar settings. This was evident in the studies of Sesame Street and Blues Clues. Sesame Street was based on exposing children to many concepts during each program. The Monday program had nothing to do with the Tuesday programming, just more and more stimulation for the children. Blue Clues programs found students learned the concepts if they were repeated over time. So the concepts of Monday’s program are identical to Tuesday’s program, as were Wednesday’s, Thursday’s, and Friday’s. Children thrived on the predictability. They anticipated and they learned (Gladwell 2000).

Brain research is impacting the way we learn and the way we teach. Researchers have isolated areas of the brain responsible for various types of learning. Let me share just a few findings from this new science of teaching and learning:

- 1) Emotions impact learning (controlled by the amygdale). When we feel happy, content, comfortable optimum learning can occur.

- 2) Music carries messages to the minds of receptive learners.
- 3) Learners must be provided with sufficient feedback.
- 4) We should provide complex, multisensory learning environments.
- 5) Preexposure provides learners with a foundation upon which to build connections.
- 6) Elaboration gives the brain a chance to sort, sift, analyze, test, and deepen the learning.
- 7) We may have greater influence over the quality of our learning than previously thought.
- 8) Brain-based learning considers how the brain learns best (Jensen).

Public Schools

Returning to “Our Calling in Education,” let’s look at the final sections of the study—first, educating our children in the public schools. We know that only about nine percent of our children attend religiously-based schools. Therefore, as the Task Force report states, a majority of students are in our public schools, over fifty-five million children. When my children were growing up, we attended a large Lutheran church in our community. Often the topic of starting a Lutheran school was initiated. It was the wise belief of our pastor that we impact the public schools with strong Christian teachers, parents, and students, not by “isolating” (his term for placing our children in a separate Lutheran school); we must make our public schools stronger. This is the option for many of us where a Lutheran school may not be an option. It is what the report would call the “shared responsibility.”

Public schools are not without controversy. According to Phi Delta Kappan polls, most parents believe their schools are doing well. It is other people that are having the problems or suffering (Johnson). The charge to the schools is to teach children what is needed for living together in a democratic, pluralistic society. The schools are meant for all children, and all should feel welcome and accepted in them. This, however, is not always the case. In addition, the public schools are under a great deal of scrutiny at this time.

In Iowa, there is much discussion about school size. Can small rural schools, with graduating classes of twenty to thirty, offer all the curricular, athletic, social advantages of a larger school? Are very large schools able to offer these same advantages for all? Is there equity in funding in all districts? Are all of our children fortunate to have “highly qualified” teachers? Are there schools or districts where teachers want to teach? Are there others where outstanding teachers do not want to teach? Are all children awarded an equal opportunity to succeed? Are our schools safe?

Again we confront the accountability issue. Should the curriculum focus on the basics in order to document annual progress required by No Child Left Behind? Are other curricular areas suffering? Early childhood offerings and other compensatory programs may not be available for all children. Class size varies from district to district, and often from classroom to classroom.

Discrimination—racial, gender, socioeconomic—still exists in our schools. We must work to eliminate discrimination so all children have an equal opportunity to learn.

Choice. The voucher system is controversial and also political. Will the choice given to parents to select a school for their child provide more equality? Will choice foster a marketing approach to education? If it did, would this be harmful?

I believe, as does “Our Calling in Education,” that we have an obligation to make our public schools the very best they can be. All students deserve an equal opportunity to learn. If this is true, I hope your mental models are similar to some of the statements I have just made about this commitment.

Education and the Church

Finally, let’s explore the church’s commitment to higher education. And let’s begin with our mental models, many of which we would share. We have all dedicated a part of our careers to higher education in a Lutheran setting, so we know and attest to the benefits: the commitment of most of our students to learning within a religious perspective, to time within our curriculum for chapel or church services, to open discussion about religion in our course work, among many, many other benefits.

We know the history of our religious institutions began with the preparation of clergy and teachers. We know the ELCA has made a commitment to Lutheran education, for which we are proud. We proudly proclaim that our institutions are colleges of the Lutheran church, in our work with our prospective students as well as our media and marketing materials. We openly discuss our callings and our vocations. We integrate our faith and learning.

Many of our institutions administer the Astin surveys that document student expectations and satisfaction. We find many points from these surveys that contrast the Lutheran education with public universities. Findings from the Task Force’s report on Lutheran colleges and universities show:

- a closer relationship of students with faculty and staff, including mentoring and discussions about faith and spiritual issues (38% to 8%);
- students who are more engaged in religious activities (64% to 28%);

- more interactions with others with similar values (79% to 59%);
- students experience college as a place that emphasizes faith and values (84% to 35%);
- students integrating faith into other aspects of their lives (60% to 14%).

We also know that about one third of eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds are in college and that three times as many college students attend public colleges and universities. Many of the same challenges are evident at the higher education level as with public K-12 schools. Among these are the need for strong Christian teachers in our public colleges; the need for opportunities for Christians to congregate and discuss moral and ethical values and issues, among many others. I want to stress the importance of the church to promote campus ministry programs on public school campuses. My son has a campus ministry internship at University of California at Berkeley with thousands of students; historically, only twenty to thirty students attend Lutheran campus ministry events. This is not satisfactory! I hope this can change. This is an untapped resource to provide leaders for the church and society.

Let us end with the mental model of access to higher education. If we truly believe in the concept of equal opportunity for all, then who can attend our colleges and universities? Who can and will attend Lutheran institutions of higher education?

Grants and scholarships must continue and increase. Fortunately, the Pell grant has enabled many students to attend college, although each year we hear of cuts in funding for scholarships and grants. Can congregations provide more support for our students attending colleges of higher education? Will the ELCA continue to support the institutions of higher learning? How can we assure that socioeconomic status is not the primary determinant of college matriculation?

I applaud the efforts of the authors in “Our Calling in Education.” How do we assure that the talking points continue and there is equal opportunity for all who want to receive a Lutheran education?

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