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Agents of Hope

Steve Sider

Wilfrid Laurier University, ssider@wlu.ca

Angie Davids

George Fox University

Amanda Knowles

George Fox University

Annalisa Luimes

George Fox University

Leanne Van Bostelen

George Fox University

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The ICCTE Journal

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Agents of Hope

Professor Steve Sider

Students: Angie Davids, Amanda Knowles, Annalisa Luimes, Leanne Van Bostelen

Abstract

This paper considers the Christian teacher's "place" in today's increasingly diverse public school classrooms. Specifically, the paper explores the complexities of working as a Christian within educational systems which promote tolerance of all cultures and religious views. Is it possible for a Christian teacher to remain committed to The Way while employed in a system which encourages pluralism, equity, and diversity? Using insights and responses of participants in a Christian university education course on teaching in multicultural classrooms, a framework is provided to consider what it means to teach as a Christian in multicultural school settings.

Introduction

Having recently graduated with my Bachelor of Education, I was excited about the opportunity to teach in the same public school as a teacher who was my teacher when I was in Grade 6. This particular teacher had a great impact on me as a child. Perhaps most significantly, he had demonstrated that he cared deeply for his students and for his faith. Although he did not talk openly about his Christian beliefs, I recall one particular private conversation in which he told me that he was praying for me. I had thought that I was the only Christian in the class and I was astounded by his pronouncement and deeply impacted.

I was more surprised at his overt demonstration of his religious beliefs when we taught as peers. Early in December, I walked into the school where we taught together and proceeded to my classroom. He taught in an adjacent classroom and the bulletin board that he had worked on the evening before immediately caught my attention. The letters on the board formulated the following statement: Jesus is the Reason for the Season.

I was caught off-guard. How could he put such a blatantly religious message on his bulletin board? Would there not be an outcry from those of different religious communities? In an age of pluralism and tolerance, where "Merry Christmas" had been replaced with "holiday wishes" and "season's greetings" was he not demonstrating a disrespectful, narrow, intolerant attitude? How would the students in this multi-ethnic school respond to such an overtly Christian statement? At its core, I was really wondering "how shall I then teach as a Christian in a multicultural classroom?"

These questions would frame my own journey as a teacher in diverse, public school classrooms. Years later, when I had transitioned into the role of a professor, they would lead to the development of an Education course at Redeemer University College focused on teaching in multicultural classrooms. The "Teaching in Multicultural Classrooms" course raises key questions for Christian pre-service teachers to consider about teaching in diverse classrooms and how to navigate the potential boundaries to demonstrating faith commitment in these classrooms. As one student in the course stated:

...I think that one of the most significant things a teacher can do to prepare his/herself for teaching in a multicultural classroom is to take a course on multiculturalism. A 1995 study ... reported that "pre-service teachers were undecided about the effectiveness of their teacher education preparation in developing their ability to teach and communicate with students and parents whose cultural and religious backgrounds were different from theirs" (Walker-Dalhousie & Dalhousie, 2006, p. 70). This should set off a flashing red light somewhere! If teacher education programs are not preparing new teachers for the reality of a Canadian classroom, then something has to change. (Amanda)

The students recognize the importance of wrestling with questions of faith and service; the course provides an avenue to do such. The purpose of this paper then is to examine how teacher candidates explore the issue of teaching as people of faith within school systems which are committed to pluralism, tolerance, and diversity.

One assignment in the course requires students to reflect on what it meant to teach as a Christian in a diverse, multicultural school setting. The assignment is given at the beginning of the course but is not collected until the end. Throughout the duration of the course, students are provided with an opportunity to consider the issues of multiculturalism, multicultural education, and what it means to teach in multicultural classrooms. The course content includes a wide discussion of historical and social factors which have led to today's diverse classrooms.

Throughout the course, students are consistently reminded to make personal connections with the course content and how they might teach in multicultural classrooms. This paper considers some of the responses to this question. Four of the students in the course, which was offered in the fall of 2008, agreed to co-author this paper. They were selected by the primary author due to the richness and complexity of their reflections in the assignment. Their insights serve as the basis for the paper. The primary author helped organize the paper according to themes which emerged from the student assignments and in giving direction to the conclusions and discussion section. Three of the participants were pre-service teachers while the fourth had been a teacher in a Christian school for a number of years and was taking the course for professional development.

This paper does not follow the format of that of a typical research-oriented paper. Instead, the paper considers how the students in the course, now co-authors of this paper, conceptualize how they might teach in diverse school settings. It provides rich opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities which exist for Christian teachers in multicultural classrooms. By considering a "practice-oriented" approach to the paper, it is the hope of the authors that others might be prompted to further consider how Christian teachers may serve as agents of hope.

Specifically, this paper examines themes which emerged in the student responses, such as: developing an understanding of the purpose of teaching in today's pluralistic educational system, what opportunities and barriers may face a Christian teacher in a diverse public school system, the importance of developing safe, nurturing classroom environments, and considering different strategies that the pre-service teachers felt would be appropriate to use in a class. The paper concludes with an examination of the potential for Christians to serve as agents of hope in highly diverse, multicultural classroom setting.

Setting the Context for Teaching in Multicultural Classrooms

Numerous questions are utilized to set the context for the "Teaching in Multicultural Classrooms" course, such as, "what is multicultural education?" and "what does a multicultural classroom 'look like'?" In the Canadian context, these questions are clearly tied to the idea of "multiculturalism." Canada's Multiculturalism Act of 1988 officially made Canada a multicultural, albeit bilingual, state. The protection of English and French language rights, within a broader multicultural framework, had significant social implications, most obvious being, "... that while Canada had two official languages, it had no official culture – as far as the government was concerned, every culture mattered." (Egbo, 2009, p. 41).

As a result of this legal framework, Canadians from diverse ethnic backgrounds are ensured of certain provisions, such as the ability to learn a heritage language. Ostensibly, the Multiculturalism Act served to demonstrate that the different ethnic and linguistic groups which make up Canada are valued and worthy of celebrating. How this acceptance and awareness of diverse cultures is to be accomplished is often referred to as multicultural education. Although there is no universal agreement on what multicultural education really involves (Banks & Banks, 2001), in the Canadian context, it is seen as an organized attempt to manage and accommodate cultural diversity in schools and to transform educational policies, programs, and practice (Fleras & Elliott, 1992). One of the fundamental aspects of multicultural education is to consider the power relationships which occur in schools, whether demonstrated through the curriculum or through teacher-student-community

relationships. Supporters of multicultural education would argue that educational quality for students from diverse cultural groups is a critical goal (Banks & Banks, 2001).

The idea of teaching in a multicultural classroom is a reflection of the diverse nature of Canada. Classrooms, particularly in urban areas, may have many different cultures represented. For example, classrooms in Toronto are considered some of the most diverse in the world, sometimes with 25 different languages representing the 25 different students in the classroom. Teachers, as a result, are encouraged to find ways in which to welcome diversity in the classroom and to consider how they, as individuals or collectively as systems, contribute to the marginalization or empowerment of students from diverse backgrounds. Thus, teaching in multicultural classrooms is not as much about multiculturalism (as a policy) or multicultural education (as a curriculum) as it is about recognizing, and responding to, the various cultures and backgrounds represented in the classroom.

The challenge for many Christians who teach in multicultural classrooms is to recognize the beauty of cultural diversity, while acknowledging the boundaries of acceptance for some aspects of diversity. For example, the Christian teacher who has a Muslim student in his/her class, is confronted with the challenge of seeing that child as created in the image of God, and thus welcoming him/her, while not accepting the religious world-view of the child. These are very real challenges for the Christian teacher, and as pre-service teachers consider these challenges, they are confronted with the future realities of their vocation. The remainder of this paper considers the perspectives of these future teachers as they embark on understanding what it means to teach in multicultural classrooms.

The Purpose of Teaching

One of the themes which emerged from the student reflective papers was a consideration for what they saw as the purpose of teaching. Interestingly, the assignment which prompted the reflective writing does not explicitly ask the students to describe what they see as the purpose of teaching. Yet, each student considers this as they conceptualize teaching in multicultural classrooms. Although each has a slightly varied perspective on the purpose of teaching, they all include a hope to meet a common need.

“To teach is to touch a life forever,” authoritatively stated the poster that used to hang on the wall of my classroom. What does it mean to touch a life? There are many ways in which any teacher can impact a student’s life, but a Christian educator’s insight into what the gospel teaches about human nature provides a much deeper perspective on educational curriculum. Today the posters on my classroom wall do not site axioms of time or moral wisdom. Rather, they quote verses of sacred songs and texts from the Bible which reflect who I am as a Christian and the worldview upon which I base my teaching. . . . Two mantras directed my personal and professional development: “In Him we live, move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28) and Christ’s summary of the law “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). The implications of these texts permeate the courses and lessons I prepare and impact the relationship I have with each of my students. (Leanne)

A teacher imparts knowledge and skill all the time whether that is done through mathematics, history, art, physical education, etc. I believe it is my duty as a teacher to continue that very important job of teaching through social dynamics the students may encounter and live through. I will be held accountable for all that I teach and so neglecting to impart knowledge and skills in the area of diversity would be of great consequence. Helping students to see the necessity for acceptance and understanding of their fellow classmates and individuals in general is vital to fulfilling one’s duty as an effective teacher. (Angie)

Although non-Christian teachers may desire to teach to meet a shared need, they would not necessarily see a higher purpose to their teaching or to understand that it is God who provides us with the gifts to engage in teaching. Further, Christian teachers work within the teaching profession as a result of a sense of calling, seeing teaching as a vocation, thereby perhaps having a greater sense of empathy for the diverse students with whom they serve. Although teaching in a multicultural setting may be challenging, the Christian teacher recognizes that all children are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) and that under Christ, we are one without difference based on skin colour, language, or cultural background (Galatians 3:28).

The Christian teacher in the public school

In many ways, the Christian teacher serves the same purpose whether in a Christian school or a publicly-funded one. There is no Biblical indication that those who work within Christian ministry (i.e. Christian school) are serving in some higher calling than those who work within a secular system. Yet, there is no doubt that a Christian teacher within a Christian school can be (and is expected to be) explicit in his/her faith walk and talk. Within a public school system, a Christian teacher may not be able to verbalize his/her religious beliefs. For example, a teacher would not be able to openly pray with his/her students or share scriptural references. This is what makes the illustration at the beginning of the paper, of an “openly-Christian” teacher, so startling. Of course, some factors contributed to the teacher being able to be so clearly Christian in his actions: he had a stellar reputation as a teacher and he was just a few years away from retirement and felt that little could be done to remove him from the public school system! Aside from this unique case, there is on-going concern that even tertiary or private Christian acts can be considered under the purview of the state as witnessed by the example of Chris Kempling in British Columbia. In this case, a Christian teacher was dismissed by the teaching federation in British Columbia after stating his personal religious beliefs in a newspaper editorial.

Multicultural policy suggests that all cultures share equal value and that no ethnicity or religion should trump others. This tolerance of all beliefs within a post-modern context, certainly supports a relativistic worldview. It can be an immense challenge for the Christian teacher, who believes in a defined Way to connect with God (John 14:6), to teach within this context. After all, does the Christian teacher have any means by which to demonstrate his/her faith in this environment? The student participants’ responses provide insight into how they perceive that the Christian teacher can work in a multicultural setting despite these challenges.

In a publicly funded school it may be more difficult to explicitly share God’s love but through discussion about acceptance and tolerance, students will begin to understand that differences are a blessing rather than something to fear or shy away from. (Angie)

I have often thought of teaching in a public multicultural setting. I think what the public school system needs is Christians. As a young adult I have been mentoring young Christian students at a public high school and we discuss the ways in which they can be disciples to their non-Christian friends in a non-threatening, Christ-like way. I hope that as a Christian teacher I will be able to continue demonstrating my faith in the public school system. Furthermore, we are all called to be disciples no matter what our vocation is. Christians will always be faced with the challenge of demonstrating their faith to non-Christians in this world. (Annalisa)

The participants reflected on how one’s Christian values can support the work that needs to be done in public school settings. Rather than seeing the Christian and the secular as being polar opposites, the participants recognized that much could be accomplished by the Christian teacher in the public school:

As an aspiring teacher I wish to teach students how to be equipped as citizens in this diverse world. An influential teacher will persevere to model the virtues of Christ by loving their students and teaching them how to love others. “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2, NIV). By loving others the ethical standards of care, respect, trust and integrity implemented by the Ontario College of Teachers will also be achieved (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008). Likewise, these ethical standards are parallel to that of Christian values. (Annalisa)

Another participant discussed the importance of teaching with commitment, but without an expectation that her own Christian beliefs would be imposed on the students with whom she interacts:

As a Christian educator my commitment is to Christ and I want my actions to mirror His as I interact with my students. However, I do not feel that it is my role as a teacher to convert students from different backgrounds to Christianity or to impose certain cultural beliefs on them... As far as I’m concerned, unless teaching in a Christian school, the function of education is not doctrinal in nature. This does not mean that I won’t pray for my students or that I won’t show them Christ’s love through my actions, but it does mean that I will respect their

cultural background along with their religious traditions and differences. Regardless of the differences that can often separate or segregate students, the most important thing for a Christian educator to remember is that each student is an image bearer of Christ and so we need to reflect on this as we plan our classrooms. (Amanda)

As participants considered how they might interact with students in multicultural classrooms, each suggested that the interactions with students from diverse cultural backgrounds served as a witness. Although the belief systems might be different, the participants recognized that these differences could not lead to a diminishing of their commitment to these students.

While standing in awe of God, peering into a diverse classroom is also a humbling experience as each student comes in to be educated according to a government curriculum and I am provided with the opportunity to show them God's providence through the manner in which I approach each topic and lesson. Students must see through my work that I love them (as God commands), even if they do not subscribe to the same beliefs. Each student has a unique story and personality, but each one is brought in to be educated. (Leanne)

As the instructor for the course, I was surprised and pleased with the ways in which the students articulated their thoughts on teaching in public schools. Although we see a variety of perspectives, it is clear that these pre-service teachers are seriously contemplating how they will teach as Christians within diverse classrooms.

The Safe Classroom

One theme that was consistent in the participants' responses was the integral need for Christian teachers to ensure that their classrooms are places that are considered safe by their students. Students coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds may face extreme stress, either from the linguistic and cultural "negotiation" of their experiences or from the psycho-emotional trauma of leaving another country (Cummins, 2001). A Christian teacher must make it a priority to establish the classroom as a refuge.

The teacher has great influence in a classroom. He/she can promote social justice through the interactions with students, the curriculum they use, and by welcoming diversity in the classroom. It is

important to explore the various ways in which students can feel welcomed and a part of a new community in these diverse setting. I believe it is essential to empower students to love the culture they came from, discover the culture they are going to be a part of, and be open to new cultures.... (Annalisa)

Recognizing that many children come into classrooms from challenging backgrounds and situations, the participants in the course recognized that it is fundamentally important to create "safe space" in the classroom. This space is not just a physical one in which the students most basic needs may be met, but also a safe emotional one where acceptance and healing can occur.

Every student has a background story that will affect the way they learn and perform in class: some students come from dysfunctional families, some students are refugees fleeing from a war torn country, while other students choose to attend class under the influence of drugs. No matter what the circumstance, students should enter the school feeling safe and accepted. Teachers can create a learning environment where students are respected and respect each other. (Annalisa)

One course participant (Amanda) discussed the importance of understanding cultural differences. Amanda stated that she felt it was important for teachers to "level the playing field in their classrooms" and to try and understand what it must be like to come from another country whose ideas and values are much different than those found in Canada. She directed our attention to material written by Aaron Wolfgang (1977) and discussed how Wolfgang talks about how a teacher can prepare his/herself for teaching in a multicultural classroom by putting him/herself in the position of the student:

While the activity suggested may sound bizarre I think the author makes a good point. His suggestion is to "challenge some of the accepted ways of doing things in your own culture' (Wolfgang, 1977, p. 148). His examples include looking people in the eyes in an elevator, arriving late to a meeting with your principal [sic], showing up 30 minutes early to a dinner party or cutting into the front of a long line of people waiting to purchase movie tickets. The point of this is to see how people react and to know how it must feel to be out of place and to not

understand the cultural nuances that we otherwise take for granted.

For another student, Leanne, teaching in the diverse classroom provides ample reward, despite potential challenges:

As both the teacher and the students are sinful, mistakes and misunderstandings will occur. However, clear understanding of God's providence makes the diverse classroom a rewarding and enriching place where both teachers and students can learn about one another, their cultures, and beliefs. Despite the effects of sin, conflicting perspectives, and the government's utopian ideals for multicultural education, the Christian teacher can influence students to provide meaningful learning, far beyond the official curriculum. By understanding one's biases that threaten to destroy the cultural mosaic of the classroom a teacher can direct discussion and interaction and lead students to understand different cultures with his or her own worldview.

Fundamental to a Christian teacher's work in a public school system is establishing the classroom as a safe place for students. As these pre-service teachers note, the classroom should be a place where children can learn about each other's culture and about the historical and social make-up of Canada or the United States. Concurrently, the classroom needs to be a place where children don't feel intimidated by other students or by the teacher. For the Christian teacher to have an effective witness, he/she must first provide a place where the children can feel safe and where they sense that they are loved.

Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships

Once the Christian teacher has demonstrated an ethic of care and safety within the classroom, there is great opportunity to influence students in the multicultural classroom through teacher-student relationships and mentoring.

As a student begins to see that your interest in him/her extends even to cultural background, a healthy relationship may be formed to express a desire for continued learning and acceptance in the classroom. It is a huge sign of respect when you have taken the time, as a teacher, to understand a student and his/her culture. Curiosity expressed through questions and discussion may even open doors for students to feel pride in where they come

from and who they are. It is vital that we understand our own biases and preconceived notions that we bring to a classroom setting. These will influence the way that we teach and interact with students whether we want it to or even realize it is happening. Minimizing the effect of that through education and awareness will be a significant aid in maintaining an accepting and celebratory environment in the classroom. (Angie)

I think the most important aspect of teaching is to live out what you are aiming to teach. If we look directly at Jesus Christ, who was an incredible teacher and offered instruction to the multitudes, he lived out what he taught. He taught about love and forgiveness, sacrifice and kindness and those things were very apparent throughout his life. It is such an important witness for students to see examples of acceptance, love and tolerance in their teacher's life. Many do not understand the impact that a teacher can have on the life of a child. In a diverse classroom there will often be a wide range of home-lives represented. The teacher may be an influence far beyond his/her own understanding. Allowing a child to realize that his/her culture, nationality and uniqueness are both accepted and celebrated, may liberate a child in a way he/she may not have experienced otherwise. (Angie)

A challenge that Leanne recognized was that students themselves may not demonstrate acceptance amongst themselves. The teacher must show the way in this regard. By modeling acceptance, the teacher provides an opportunity for students in the classroom to begin to develop understanding of each other. As this evolves, the classroom becomes a place where not only is the teacher accepting, but the students become accepting of each other.

As they begin to find their way, the students may not openly accept one another at first. Conflicts may exist within the classroom due to ignorance or xenophobia, but as time passes students will be exposed to the characters, biases, and backgrounds of one another. It is even possible, depending at what grade level the students are studying that their own understanding of culture, politics, and perspectives may make them ignorant about the diverse nature of the classroom. By using the available curriculum resources, I promote awareness and the interaction required for students to develop a sense of community in the classroom.

As the students and teacher get to know one another, their unique community becomes reflective of Canadian society. I must be able to show my students the love and grace of God by getting to know them, and their cultures, individually. Getting to know my students begins before they enter the classroom and the process continues with ongoing research.

These pre-service teachers express a desire to carve out relationships with the students in their future classrooms. They see these relationships as key to positively effecting life-change in their students.

Strategies in the classroom

The participants suggested that there are many strategies that the Christian teacher can use in the classroom to demonstrate an appreciation for the variety of cultures which may be found within the classroom and community. This recognition of the diversity within God's creation provides students with an opportunity to develop appreciation of their own culture and new understandings of the cultural backgrounds of others. Angie suggested that the teacher could set each student up with a week that they are responsible for bringing in pictures and information and props that represent their culture and heritage. She suggested that, if possible, they could be given space on a bulletin board to share aspects of their culture they are proud of. Resources such as books from the local library could be provided to assist in each student's quest to teach their fellow classmates about who they are and where they come from. Angie suggested that even with children born and raised in Canada this is an important opportunity for them to find their roots or celebrate their Canadian heritage.

Annalisa discussed the importance of supporting the English language learner in the classroom as well:

Students whose 1st language is not English should not feel at a disadvantage for academic success or for success in society in comparison to the student whose 1st language is English. There are many ways in which teachers can facilitate the transition to learning a new language. Students should be corrected indirectly and encouraged to maintain their 1st language. Furthermore, as a teacher I will always encourage students to learn a second language other than their maternal language. The process of learning another language allows students to sympathize with people from other

cultures either immigrants or visitors by showing them patience.

Annalisa suggested that "Learning a foreign language is a gift: a gift of joy to strangers we meet and also to ourselves" (Smith & Carvill, 2000, p. 65). By learning another language, she felt that students could be a blessing to people from other cultures.

As revealed in Smith & Carvill's work, a student's calling is "to be a blessing as strangers in a foreign land, and be hospitable to strangers in their homeland" (p. 57-58). The love that students show to others allows for healing in divisions between different cultures. I believe at the heart of every culture is their language. As revealed in Acts 2:1-47, language boundaries were broken when the Holy Spirit came upon the people and they heard the gospel in their mother tongue. The significance of this happening is the gospel truly touched the heart of the people when they were exposed to it in their mother language. Language is a beautiful gift from God. He created many languages and learning a language is a new discovery of God's vast creation and it provides more insight to who our Creator is.

Although the focus of the student papers was not to develop strategies for teaching in diverse classrooms, these examples provide practical examples of the ways in which Christian teachers can support the needs of diverse learners. Providing a safe classroom environment and developing positive mentoring relationships with students will be made even more effective if we marry these attempts with solid pedagogical techniques which support the learning needs of diverse learners.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The thoughtful responses of the co-authors, provided as participants in a course on teaching in multicultural classrooms, give me great hope for the influence of Christian teachers within diverse school systems. In fact, it seems that the great opportunity for Christian teachers is to be agents of hope within highly diverse, highly needy, multicultural classroom contexts. This can be true both for public schools and Christian schools since many of the same multicultural-related issues are facing all school systems: cultural diversity, global awareness, media influence, world events, and government policies. Many children within out

communities, and their families, struggle with the challenges of language, work, social identification, and discrimination. Christian teachers have an opportunity to purposefully and missionally be providers of hope for these families.

To be able to be agents of hope in these settings, we must be committed to providing the most exemplary of classes. As Van Brummelen (2002) states, Christian educators “teach with commitment since they want to teach for commitment. Their commitment affects how they make decisions in the classroom, how they structure learning, how they assess learning—and how they plan their curriculum” (p. 10). As demonstrated through the comments of the participants, there is a deep commitment to be excellent teachers.

We must ensure that our classrooms are safe, where ethical standards of practice are regularly demonstrated: care, trust, integrity, respect. These must be classrooms where children are not teased or bullied because of their (lack of) language abilities, social (mis)cues, and familial/cultural habits and traditions. As one course participant, Angie, stated, “Having the environment of acceptance as a standard will, hopefully, penetrate the walls of the classroom into the playground and student’s lives at home.”

Further, our classrooms must go beyond being safety zones to being places where relationships are nurtured and celebrations occur. Christian teachers who demonstrate by their word and deed that they indeed care for their students, no matter what the cultural, linguistic, or even religious background, will make a deep impression upon these students. Celebrations should recognize the victories that go along with learning a new language or of learning about a cultural tradition. Our classrooms are places where children should feel proud of their own heritage and concurrently recognize the inherent benefits of living within Canada (or the United States). These celebrations should be natural outpourings of the positive mentoring relationships which are established between teacher and student.

Finally, the Christian teacher in the multicultural class needs to be cognizant of the tension which exists as a result of any belief system. Simply doing one’s job without deeply considering the values which support who we are leads to a shallow rendering of being salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16).

It seems that we must be intentional and purposeful in regularly seeking God’s direction as we learn about ourselves and those with whom we serve alongside. To be effective agents of hope, Christian teachers must be aware both that they are agents and that there is hope. Further, this hope is extended as we engage with children and equip them to be agents of hope themselves. The teacher candidates who participated in this paper by sharing their reflections are well on their way to being such agents of hope: there is a recognition that a missional perspective must frame our existence as Christian teachers in increasingly multicultural school systems.

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