Engaging Authenticity to Explore the Purpose and Nature of Education: Insights of Three Independent Christian School Principals

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the notion of authenticity within the field of independent Christian education in Ontario. Three experienced Christian school principals accepted an invitation to participate in semi-structured interviews in order to draw out insights into the purpose and nature of Christian education. Data analysis yielded five conceptual understandings relative to authenticity: authorship, relatedness, autonomy, reflection, and excellence. These conceptual understandings reveal the potential of authenticity to facilitate thoughtful discussions about the purpose and nature of education.

Keywords: authenticity, authentic Christian education, authenticity in education

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Education is an enterprise beset with challenges. Pressures exist to teach the curriculum, assess fairly, promote students, maintain high marks, and prepare students to make a positive contribution to society. Through the hurried and harried pace of the school day, students can feel like automatons, teachers can feel ignored by principals, and principals can feel trapped in the bureaucracy of the education system. Under these conditions, educators and educational leaders can be hard-pressed to ask questions about the purpose and nature of education. Independent Christian schools face the concomitant challenge of offering an education that is distinctively Christian. With a history extending back more than 50 years in Ontario, the growth of Christian schools was due in large part to the immigration of Dutch Calvinists following World War II (Van Brummelen, 1993). The resulting Christian communities were of the conviction that an alternative mode of education, Christian education, was needed to equip their children for an alternative way of life: the Christian life (Wolterstorff, 2002). Unfortunately, over the past 25 years the number of Christian schools in Ontario has plateaued and student enrolment has declined (Guldemond, 2014). While first-generation immigrants viewed the support of these schools as a priority, Guldemond (2014) demonstrates that "a loss of commitment to the old vision/tradition" is one of the "most frequent reasons for the stagnation" (p. 104) of Christian schools today. For Christian school principals faced with the challenge of restoring that vision, the notion of authenticity could help identify and highlight deep understandings of the purpose and nature of education for their respective learning communities.

This paper presents findings of a study that explored the concept of authenticity within the field of independent Christian education in Ontario. The study was grounded on the proposition that a dialogue around authenticity could provide fresh insights into the purpose and nature of Christian education. The overarching research question was, "What is authentic Christian education?" Rooted in philosophy (Morris, 1966), authenticity has been used to examine issues within the social sciences (Taylor, 1991) and within education (Starratt, 2012). Authenticity seldom has been investigated within the context of independent Christian schools. For this investigation, three experienced Christian school principals accepted an invitation to explore the concept of authenticity within the context of Christian education. Five conceptual understandings relative to authenticity emerged from this study: authorship, relatedness, autonomy, reflection, and excellence. Together these elements demonstrate authenticity's potential to elicit deep reflections about the purpose and nature of education.

Literature Review

Schools do not operate in a vacuum and, therefore, they are not immune to changes that occur in the culture. Among these changes, individualism and the pursuit of one's own self-interest has been identified as a lamentable development (Bloom, 1987). Taylor (1991), for example,

decries the self-centred focus of individuals leading shallow lives and attributes it to an abuse of the concept of authenticity. In an effort to be authentic, Taylor argues, the pendulum has swung to the extreme of individualism, which "involves a centring on the self and a concomitant shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical" (p. 14). Within the contemporary depiction of authenticity, Taylor sees lives being "narrowed or flattened" (p. 14) as a "narcissistic variant" (p. 71), and he calls for a restoration of the original ideal of authenticity. His proposition aligns with Starratt's (2012) contention that "the construction and enactment of personal authenticity is the most fundamental and profound ethical responsibility all human beings face" (p. 85). What follows is a brief overview of authenticity as a concept followed by a sketch of how authenticity is discussed within the field of education.

Authenticity and the Self

As a theoretical construct, authenticity has been described as a slippery concept (Baggini, 2004), an evocative yet elusive construct (Kreber, 2010), and a concept that brings us into ontological and epistemological quagmires associated with the self (Bialystok, 2017). Splitter (2009) suggests that authenticity is "one of those central, common but contestable concepts which cry out for continual reflection and (re)examination" (p. 136). Authenticity is *common*. Whether applied in everyday contexts to a host of items—from pizza sauce to clothing—or applied in discussions of philosophy to persons, authenticity is valued as an inherently normative concept (Bialystok, 2017). As a personal quality, there is something desirable about being authentic, furnishing a sense of fortitude despite the challenges encountered in a complex and uncertain world (Kreber, 2010). There is also something compelling about authenticity to researchers, evidenced by the outpouring of publications in recent years on the theme of authenticity in relation to personal lives, work, and education (Kreber, 2013).

Kreber (2013) pondered the surge of publications on authenticity and wondered if it could be traced to the conditions of our times such that people are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. At the turn of the century, Gergen (2000) argued that postmodernism combined with the technology of social saturation created a condition in which "one willingly though shamefully forsakes the path of authenticity" (p. 150). At the heart of these concerns is the question of the authentic self. Splitter (2009) asserts that the "authentic self is arguably the philosopher's holy grail" (p. 137) and yet philosophers approach the concept from different perspectives. Such diversity of perspectives implies that authenticity is *contestable*. Bialystok (2017) demonstrates that "authenticity has two notable, and incompatible, sources in Western philosophy" (p. 4), existentialism and essentialism. The existentialist strives to rise above the crowd, not by looking to horizons of significance but by looking to the self (Knight, 2008). The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) wrestled with the idea of human existence and reasoned that "existence is not a state of *being*, but is a *process*, a *becoming*" (Zuidema, 1960,

p. 15; emphasis in original). This becoming could be characterized as a project that each person is involved in. The 20th century philosopher Martin Heidegger built on Kierkegaard's thinking to question the meaning of *being*. In his discourse, Heidegger (1953/2010) distinguished two kinds of being: authenticity and inauthenticity. The former is consciously aware of self in the world while the latter is construed with being taken in by the world or everydayness. Rather than a core essence, the authentic self is constructed through free choices (Bialystok, 2017).

In contrast, the essentialists' sense of the core self can be traced to the 19th century Romanticist view of the passionate and creative self, as well as the 20th century Modernist view of the rational self (Gergen, 2000). In these cases, the authentic self is discovered through introspection and intellectual reflection (Splitter, 2009). Recognizing that this perspective could be misconstrued as being self-centred, others contend for a view of oneself as one among others (Splitter, 2009). For example, Taylor (1991) argued for a retrieval of authenticity as a moral ideal, recognizing that as fundamentally dialogical beings, humans form their identity in dialogue. Taylor summarized this perspective stating:

> Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands. (p. 40; emphasis in original)

Kreber (2013) demonstrated that external demands were once part of how meaning and purpose were found in life. In Ancient Greece people fulfilled their place in the cosmic order. This cosmocentric worldview would eventually give way to a theocentric worldview where the fundamental questions of life were answered in relation to God. Both of these worldviews would be replaced by an anthropocentric worldview that is more self-referential. These worldviews and philosophies are the context in which authenticity has emerged in relation to each person's quest for meaning and purpose in life.

Authenticity and Education

Regardless of the philosophical position taken, the attention given to authenticity over the past century has influenced educational theory and practice (Bialystok, 2017). While traditional theories of education emphasized subject matter and the teacher as expert, Dewey and the progressive movement drew attention to the fact that each child is involved in their own project of the self (Knight, 2008). Starratt (2012) links the quest for authenticity to education when he laments:

> When young people are exposed to inauthentic learning for twelve or more years then it is little wonder that at the final bell of every day, and on the last day of school every year, so many young people depart with such feelings of emancipation. They are free to be themselves. (p. 86)

For Starratt, each child's quest for authenticity is often ignored in the hurried and harried pace of education today. Nevertheless, Bialystok (2017) surmises that "as a culture we hold personal authenticity in high esteem and would understandably wish for our children both to become authentic and to be educated by those who embody such a virtue" (p. 2).

In their comparative review of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching, Kreber et al. (2007) acknowledge that although authenticity is difficult to define, it is recognized as important to teaching and learning. Their review reveals such themes related to authenticity as individuation, self-authorship, and identity. "Authenticity is seen, for example, to make individuals more whole, more integrated, more fully human … and so forth" (Kreber et al., 2007, p. 24). This outcome aligns with Starratt's (2012) assertion that "for every young person in the school, both male and female, the core moral agenda of their whole lives is to become richly, deeply, human" (p. 87). Another theme that Kreber et al. link to authenticity is the notion of care. Care is described in the context of the relational nature of humans. Being aware of the freedom to choose, Morris (1966) also discusses the burden of care that each person must bear. The uncaring, impersonal nature of institutions in society can lead to the oft lamented assembly-line nature of schools. In identifying a pedagogy of care, Noddings (1992) observes that "Kids learn in communion. They listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter" (p. 36). Care addresses what is essential for full human life, a perspective of the student that is not limited by test scores, subject matter, or any other educational construct.

Closely related to, and certainly not distinct from the theme of self in the literature on authenticity and education, is the attribute of autonomy. Bialystok (2014) associates autonomy with essentialists like those in the 19th century, who sought for the inner voice to guide the self. Cuypers (2010) suggests that there is a close connection between autonomy and moral responsibility. Both Bialystok and Cuypers argue that it is impossible for someone to be truly autonomous. True autonomy is derived from my self-law, unimpeded by any external influences. In reality, however, from our earliest moments we observe and learn values from those around us, and our self develops in dialogue with these external influences. Starratt (2012) distinguishes the autonomous individual from those who function as automatons. He describes autonomy as implying "a sense of personal choice, of taking personal responsibility for one's actions, of claiming ownership of one's actions" (p. 23) and contrasts that with "those who act out of a mindless routine, or simply because others tell them to act that way, or that act out of a feeling of obligation to or fear of those in authority" (p. 22).

Authenticity and Christian Education

The perspectives above imply that authenticity is *central* to the purpose of education. Starratt (2012) calls educators and educational leaders to cultivate ethical schools that honour the moral agenda of students in their pursuit of authenticity. He envisions the use of the "academic

curriculum as a primary carrier of moral development toward a moral identity" that involves the learner in "exploring their identity as members of the worlds of culture, nature, and society" (p. 95). Christian schools operate with a similar vision, to teach the academic curriculum through the lens of a Christian worldview in an organic manner. If the core moral agenda of students' lives is to become richly, deeply human as Starratt contends, then we cannot neglect their spiritual life while they are at school. Yet, despite these noble intentions, inauthentic tendencies can develop in Christian schools. For example, Green (2012) observed in her study of Christian schools that biblical teaching was restricted to Bible class and assemblies and was not present in the academic studies throughout the day. Green concluded that the students got the message "that the Bible wasn't relevant to the wider subject curriculum" and that "for the majority of students it was thus marginal to their own cultural practice" (p. 18). This separation of biblical teachings from other areas of study illustrates what can happen when teaching separates the academic curriculum from what matters crucially to the purpose of these schools.

While authenticity in education is a phenomenon that has been explored, the literature revealed that little attention had been given to authenticity in the context of Christian education. Moreover, the literature does not address directly the perspective of school principals relative to authenticity in education. This study sought to address these gaps by exploring how three independent Christian school principals engaged with and applied authenticity in education.

Methods

This paper draws upon data collected from a study undertaken to investigate how experienced Christian school principals understood and characterized authentic Christian education. The study employed a qualitative research methodology. Hays and Singh (2012) state that the purpose of basic qualitative research is "to expand the scope and depth of knowledge of a case for the sake of contributing knowledge to a particular discipline" (p. 109). The participants were invited to participate in an interview to explore how Christian school principals understood and fostered authentic Christian education. Their responses not only expanded understanding of authentic Christian education but also contributed new themes related to authenticity in education.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used for site and participant selection. Sandelowski (2000) states that "the ultimate goal of purposeful sampling is to obtain cases deemed information-rich for the purposes of study" (p. 338). Principals were chosen because, as educational leaders in their schools, they were well-positioned to answer questions dealing with the big picture of authentic Christian education. As with other educational leaders, their lived experiences form the bridge between theoretical ideals and the day-to-day practices in schools. Three

independent Christian school principals agreed to participate in the study. Although the sample size was relatively small, the diverse experiences of the participants served the purpose of this preliminary, generative study. Moreover, the three schools were not members of the same group of Christian schools; each had a unique history and served a distinct Christian community. Each of the participants had careers in Christian education spanning more than 25 years, having taught in Christian schools and served in administration as either a vice-principal or principal. One participant had been a principal for 4 years, while the remaining participants were principals for much longer. The gender-neutral pseudonyms of Jamie, Chris, and Charlie were used to ensure participants' anonymity.

Data Collection

As a qualitative study, individual interviews served as the primary data collection method. Creswell (2005) explains that "one-on-one interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably" (p. 215). This description fit each of the study participants. Moreover, this strategy allowed the data to go in unexpected directions based upon each principal's experience and understanding and allowed the discussion to grow beyond the pre-planned scope. Public documents from each school, such as foundational statements and statements of guiding principles, were used to create probing questions. The methodology relied on a semi-structured interview format which "uses an interview protocol as a guide and starting point for the interview" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 239) but leaves room in the interview to ask other questions or to leave out some questions. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. As the interview progressed, probing questions were posed to "get interviewees to provide a richer interview" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 242).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began by transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews and employing member checking to ensure the validity of the transcribed data. Each participant was invited to review for accuracy a summarized version of the data they provided as well as the entire transcript of their interview. The participants were also encouraged to "expand on any responses he or she would like to say more about in the existing transcript" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 260). The next step involved the process of *in vivo* coding, which was performed by creating "text segments" and "assigning a code word or phrase that accurately describes the meaning of the text segment" (Creswell, 2005, p. 238). For each interview, descriptive codes were listed in a chart to allow for comparison between interviews. The codes were refined by grouping similar codes and eliminating redundant codes in order to capture the data in a meaningful and manageable number of categories. Through this inductive process big ideas were distilled that answered the overarching question: What is authentic Christian education?

Within-case analysis consisted of identifying the big ideas and supporting codes for each interview. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to draw out themes that were evident across the interviews. Themes are defined by Creswell (2005) as "similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database" (p. 239). Thematic analysis yielded five conceptual understandings relative to authenticity.

Findings

The rich discussions about the purpose and nature of Christian education were facilitated by authenticity. As the participants engaged the notion of authenticity in the context of Christian education, they drew upon and applied their own understanding of this concept. This section presents evidence of five conceptual understandings that authenticity evoked as the participants addressed the overarching research question: What is authentic Christian education? The five conceptual understandings relative to authenticity are: authorship, relatedness, autonomy, reflection, and excellence.

The first conceptual understanding coalesced around the notion of authorship. By studying the etymology of authenticity, Jamie discovered a link to genuine authorship: "If I had to think of authentic Christian education, I would want to think about that in the larger context of Christ being the author of life." For Chris, believing that God is the author of creation produced a deep respect for the learner: "If you deeply respect the learner as God created, as fearfully and wonderfully made … then that needs to come through in my expertise in how I teach." Charlie demonstrated that this perspective had a broader impact: "How does that show up in our program, that we reflect that God is the creator and that He didn't just make it but He wants it to be sustained in a particular way?" Authorship was a key understanding that was visible in the participants' view of the child and informed their vision of authentic Christian education.

The participants captured their second conceptual understanding in the relational nature of humans. Each one, for example, referred to their belief that they live daily in relation to God, the author of creation. Charlie described humans as relational "both vertically and horizontally." The vertical relation was in reference to God while the horizontal relation was directed toward others. In a similar manner, Chris described the need to dialogue with students, especially during times of discipline, "because the long view is, what are we going to do that's going to help that person be a better person down the road; how will they contribute to society, how will they interact with others?" Responding to the allure in society to be self-centred, Jamie stated:

> I'm not saying that Christians are not self-centred, but they have to remind themselves and each other that in the end it's about God and in relation to God also the relationship to our neighbour—to those He places in our immediate context.

Applying this relational element to the classroom context, Jamie concluded, "Students remind you of your own relational being so you give of yourself to them, but they also give of

themselves to you." In contrast, Jamie cautioned that individualism is an inauthentic expression of this relation where "I may need others, but only to sort of propel myself forward." The principals acknowledged that each person's quest for authenticity is not done in isolation and that authentic Christian education should realize this relational component.

The third conceptual understanding that emerged was autonomy. Participants testified that, as principals, they operated within a paradox of autonomy and community. While they saw themselves, along with their teaching staff, as part of a community, they also spoke of the need to have and give space. Referring to the governing board of directors, Chris said, "They have to give me the space to do what I do, just like I give teachers the space to do what they do." The principals also realized that autonomy presupposed responsibility. As Chris said, "If I'm here to lead, then I need to take the space to lead." Charlie linked this administrative responsibility to authenticity: "I think that for an enterprise like this, part of the authenticity is that you accept the reality of leadership, that leadership is not a shared responsibility." In a similar vein, Chris referred to teachers as experts in their field and connected that to autonomy:

> If autonomy means I get to do whatever I want, then that's a problem. If autonomy means I'm trusted to be an expert in what I do, and I'm actually expected to be an expert in what I do—go do it! Right?

Chris felt that although some control was lost, teachers needed to be given the space to be innovative, but that "you still have to be reflective, you still have to learn from it." For Chris, school leaders can encourage autonomy and allow for a measure of risk-taking if the act of reflection roots the person's task in the core values of the school.

Reflection, the fourth conceptual understanding, was an integral part of the participants' leadership. For Jamie, authenticity in Christian education resonated with the practice of reflection, which had played a big part in this participant's career:

> Reflecting on my work was something I did right from the start, and I have never left that. I still am always thinking about why I do what I do, how I do it, what I am doing, how am I changed, and especially, I think, how do I as a Christian educator affect the life of my students. The notion of reflection and how thinking about who you are and what you do, and to connect those two, that formed the core of my work. So when I heard about your topic, authenticity in Christian education, I thought, "Yes, that speaks to my heart."

For Christian education to remain authentic, Jamie emphasized that Christian school teachers and school societies need to develop a reflective practice.

Charlie identified reflection as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the role of the principal:

> I have the privilege of being supported and paid by a community to sit around and think. It's a really important thing for leaders to be doing. Somebody's got to be thinking about this enterprise, and that thinking needs to produce something.

This act of contemplation was a necessary component of authenticity for the participants as it afforded an opportunity for them to push beyond the ordinary.

As the participants discussed authentic Christian education, they did not hesitate to emphasize excellence, the fifth conceptual understanding. As Charlie said, "I wanted more than a superficial Christian coating or Christian morality or Christian ethics. From the start, I really thought that one of the tenets of Christian education is that it has to be a good quality education." Similarly, Chris had experienced the façade of excellence in teachers who at first blush appeared to be very good but then demonstrated that they were lacking: "I think there are times when we in Christian education have, because of a person's character, we've disregarded their competence." Chris warned that "mediocrity in the guise of Christian character" was a threat to authentic Christian education. Chris expected excellence to be found in teachers who provided expert instruction: "Christian education is more about Christian educators offering expert instruction." For each of the participants, excellence was an integral component of authentic Christian education.

Discussion

Researchers have used the concept of authenticity to examine issues within society (Taylor, 1991) and within the field of education (Cuypers, 2010; Kreber et al., 2007). This study contributes a new perspective to the body of literature by exploring the concept of authenticity with school principals within the field of independent Christian education in Ontario. Five conceptual understandings relative to authenticity were distilled from the data: authorship, relatedness, autonomy, reflection, and excellence. These elements reflect the ways in which the school principals were working with the notion of authenticity to articulate the purpose and nature of Christian education. In this section, each conceptual understanding is examined relative to the literature to demonstrate how the notion of authenticity creates an avenue for thoughtful insights into the purpose and nature of education. While authenticity is recognized as being important to teaching and learning (Kreber et al., 2007), this study demonstrates the potential of authenticity to facilitate rich and deep discussions within the field of education.

Authorship

Central to a conceptual understanding of authenticity is the notion that each person is involved in their own personal quest for authenticity (Starratt, 2012). Each person within the educational setting—students, teachers, principals—is irrevocably involved in a project of the self. While authenticity connotes the idea of self–authorship (Kreber et al., 2007), the findings from this study suggest that external factors are not excluded from shaping who we are and who we are becoming. For example, the Christian school principals in this study were unified in their belief that God created all things and that this belief had implications for all areas of life, especially

education. Recognizing God as the author of creation influenced their view of students and the role Christian education has in directing students to this author. The element of authorship is reminiscent of Taylor's (1991) conclusion that "authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands" (p. 41). Similarly, Starratt (2012) argues that authentic education helps students to see themselves in relation to the natural, social, and cultural worlds. Against a horizon of things that matter crucially, teachers and their students wrestle with the formative questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Recognizing that their educational experiences contribute to their search for answers to these questions, the notion of authorship is a reminder that these answers are formed not simply by looking within but also as students look away from themselves to the horizons that education present to them.

Relatedness

In harmony with the literature on authenticity, the participants all addressed the relational nature of the human person in their discussion of authenticity and Christian education. This element influenced the way these Christian school principals guided their staff and students. Policies and practices were examined to ensure that relationships could be fostered rather than ignored. Students were encouraged to help one another and to be cognizant of their immediate relationship to God. This finding contrasts with Dueck's (2011) conclusion that the "uniquely modern predicament is that of a self which is spatially conceived as 'inward' but cut loose from (its) philosophical and theological moorings" (p. 11) and where "loyalty to self binds us together in solitude" (p. 14). The school principals in this study viewed individualism as an affront to authenticity. Their description of authenticity shines a spotlight on the other and the nurturing of relationships as a practical expression of the ethic of care (Starratt, 2012; Taylor, 1991). As the heart of professionalism in teaching (Sergiovanni, 1992), a caring ethic serves as a buffer against the extremes of individualism that would tarnish the quest for authenticity. Noddings (2010) captures the motivation for such a caring approach: "To recognize in another a better self, struggling to realize itself is indeed a lovely act" (p. 14).

Autonomy

While schools have been characterized as learning communities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009; Sergiovanni, 1992) within which are a multitude of relationships, the principals in this study drew attention to the paradox of autonomy in community. In terms of their leadership role, autonomy was seen to be consistent with authenticity. The principals needed to be given space by the governing board of directors and in turn, they needed to respect the autonomy of their teaching staff. They expected teachers to be experts in education, they gave teachers space to try new things, and they trusted teachers to make responsible decisions that would benefit student learning. Consistent with Cuypers's (2010) observation of a connection between autonomy and responsibility in the educational literature on authenticity, participants spoke of

having high expectations for teachers but also needing to support and encourage their colleagues through formal and informal supervision. This understanding illustrates what Starratt (2012) calls the "paradox of autonomy" (p. 24). Starratt explains that "one cannot be autonomous in isolation"; rather, "in authentic relationships others give us the courage to be ourselves" (p. 24). When such an environment is cultivated in a school and in a classroom, students are also able to develop autonomy within community.

Reflection

The other side of the paradox of autonomy in community is the responsibility that each autonomous agent has to pull together for a common purpose. The participants viewed commitment to the core identity and purpose of the school as a key element in maintaining authentic Christian education and they saw reflection as a means of achieving this. Reflective practice was viewed as an important professional activity tied to autonomy. Autonomy is not a licence to do whatever you want; instead, through a reflective practice actions are examined in the light of the community's core values. As the participants indicated, this reflective practice is an important part of what they do as educational leaders, one that they valued. This perspective resonates with Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory that describes the transformation that occurs in adults who intentionally reflect on their core presuppositions. Interestingly, others have described the development of authenticity as an outcome of such a transformative learning experience (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Kreber, 2013).

Excellence

The discussion of authenticity with the participants evoked the quality of excellence, the expectation that teachers would be experts at teaching and experts at learning. This facet of authenticity corresponds with Starratt's (2012) first level of transcendence: "going beyond the ordinary … striving for and achieving a level of excellence that exceeds anything one has ever done" (p. 30). Excellence served to expose the inauthentic tendency of mediocrity, simply going through the motions. Yet, for these Christian school principals, the expectation of excellence was also derived from a commitment to the Christian values of the school community. Greer and Horst (2014) demonstrate that for Christian organizations it is not enough to be distinguished as Christian; this worldview must also propel the organization towards excellence. As one participant observed, mediocrity in the guise of Christian character is not sufficient. Educational leaders press for excellence against the backdrop of the core values of the school community, expecting that autonomous, reflective teachers will strive for this quality.

Conclusion

It has been observed that in recent decades little attention has been devoted to philosophy of education (Siegel, 2010). Perhaps this is due in part to the societal emphasis on the "how" of

education rather than the "why" (Knight, 2008). In the hurried and harried pace of education today, educators and educational leaders often find themselves immersed in the day-to-day affairs of the school. They are hard-pressed to ask questions about the purpose, nature, and problems of education. Yet, underlying these educational questions is the fundamental search by students for meaning and purpose in life. In this study, authenticity drew attention to this moral agenda in education.

The five conceptual understandings—authorship, relatedness, autonomy, reflection, and excellence—echoed similar themes relative to authenticity in the literature such as self-authorship, identity, care, and autonomy. Importantly, these five elements testified to the way in which three educational leaders were appropriating authenticity as they contemplated the purpose and nature of education in their particular setting. This study demonstrates the potential of authenticity to assist educators and educational leaders of other faith-based and non-faith based schools in identifying and highlighting deeper understandings of the practice of teaching and learning for their respective learning communities.

The question of authenticity in education is also appropriate for teacher education programs. As they prepare to be teachers, teacher candidates would do well to wrestle with questions such as: What is authentic learning? What is inauthentic learning? How do I teach authentically? How do I help my students to pursue their personal authenticity? In this way, authenticity can create opportunities for teacher candidates and teacher educators to have rich, relevant, and deep discussions about the purpose and nature of education.

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