

The lens of Lutheran theology on managing teacher underperformance

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Managing teacher underperformance is a task which all principals will deal with over their careers. An exploration of this issue¹ highlights that managing this phenomenon is one of the highest causes of stress in the work of the principal.² While exploring the reasons behind this stress for my earlier research, it was apparent that Lutheran theology impacts on the manner in which principals in Lutheran schools address this phenomenon.³ The original research focused on principals and their construction of teacher underperformance. This article, however, acknowledges that other senior leaders in the school may also deal with this issue and the findings of this research may be relevant to any work they also undertake in this area.

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss teacher underperformance *per se* and the impact this has on principals, but more importantly explore the application of Lutheran theology by principals when managing this phenomenon. The first part of this paper will briefly explore underperformance before proceeding to discuss the use of theology to address this.

Addressing an issue of underperformance is seen as part of the role of the principal: 'principals are relatively accepting of the fact that they are required to deal with cases of underperformance, and that it is only one part of their role which can cause pressure or stress.'⁴

There is a lack of clarity around defining underperformance in the literature. It is, however, important to provide a brief understanding of underperformance in order to then discuss the importance of the use of Lutheran theology in managing this phenomenon.

* This article is based on research undertaken for a doctoral thesis, to investigate the question, 'How is teacher underperformance constructed by principals of Lutheran schools?' It explored how principals identified teacher underperformance, the process used and the impact of Lutheran theology in responding to this phenomenon.

1 Philip Riley, 'The human cost of school leadership,' *Independence* 37, no. 2 (2012): 46–51; Philip Riley, et al., *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey, 2019 Data* (IPPE Report) (Sydney: Institute for Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University, 2020); Mark Worthing and Shane Paterson, 'Principal Health and Wellbeing in Australian Lutheran Schools,' accessed 28 April 2021, www.lutheran.edu.au/download/principal-health-and-wellbeing-in-australian-lutheran-schools/.

2 While the research focussed on the work of the principal, the findings are applicable to any members of the leadership team who deal with this in the school.

3 Shane Paterson, *How Is Teacher Underperformance Constructed by Principals of Lutheran Schools* (EdD thesis, Flinders University, 2016).

4 Paterson, *How Is Teacher Underperformance Constructed*, 137.

Teacher performance

Various researchers including Hattie,⁵ and Jones, Jenkins, and Lord⁶ cite such practices as: holding high expectations, monitoring learning and providing feedback, having a positive attitude, having a variety of teaching strategies which influence outcomes, in defining satisfactory or effective teaching performance. This is reflective of much of the research in this area.

There is, however, less clarity around the definition of underperformance. Wragg et al., in their seminal work, would argue that underperformance is not defined by one characteristic but is displayed in 'clusters' of evidence,⁷ while Jones et al. argue that to arrive at a precise meaning of 'underperformance' one must first define 'good performance'.⁸ This, they say, is gauged by both student behaviour and student outcomes.

Several researchers, including Jones et al, and Rhodes and Beneicke, have offered as common indicators of underperformance such indicators as: complaints from parents, students and colleagues; poor classroom discipline; lack of student progress and/or underachievement; lack of lesson planning and preparation; poor subject knowledge; low expectations of students; lesson delivery that does not capture interest or enthusiasm; and curricula that are not adjusted for learning abilities.⁹

The South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (DECD), defined underperformance as occurring when, 'an employee is not performing the duties of their role to the required standard or otherwise is not performing in a satisfactory manner'.¹⁰ While the New South Wales (NSW) Government Department of Education and Communities, defined underperformance as, 'Generally, unsatisfactory performance means not meeting agreed tasks, or timeframes or standards of work.'¹¹

These statements require senior leaders to determine 'agreed tasks' or 'the duties of their role.' Such statements raise the following questions: What are the agreed tasks and duties of the teacher? How does a teacher exhibit satisfactory performance in the carriage of those duties and tasks? Without clear answers to these two questions, it is difficult to be

5 John Hattie, 'Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?,' *Australian Council for Educational Research. Annual Conference on Building Teacher Quality*. Auckland: University of Auckland (October 2003), 5.

6 Jeff Jones, Mazda Jenkin and Sue Lord, *Developing Effective Teacher Performance* (London: Paul Chapman/SAGE, 2006), 6.

7 Edward C. Wragg, Gill S. Haynes, Caroline M. Wragg, Rosemary P. Chamberlin, 'Managing incompetent teachers' (British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Sussex, Brighton, 1999), 1–40.

8 Jones, Jenkin and Lord, *Developing Effective Teacher Performance*, passim.

9 Christopher Rhodes and Sandra Beneicke, 'Professional development support for poorly performing teachers, challenges and opportunities for school managers in addressing teacher learning needs,' *Journal of In-Service Education* 29, no.1 (2003): 123–140. DOI: 10.1080/13674580300200205.

10 Department of Education and Child Development, 'Managing unsatisfactory performance guidelines,' <http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ManagingUnsatisfactoryPer.pdf>.

11 New South Wales Government, 'Guidelines for the management of conduct and performance,' https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/staff/staff_perform/conduct_perfor/pd20060335.pdf, 35.

clear about the system definitions of underperformance.

It is apparent that to settle on an 'absolute' definition of the phenomenon of underperformance is difficult. However, senior leaders in Lutheran schools have the experience to trust and back their judgement. 'The findings of this research suggest that principals tend to rely on their experience to identify a teacher who is underperforming. Once this perception has been recognised, a process of validation occurs to confirm that their perception is correct. During this process of validation, evidence is collected by the principal, and their perception is either confirmed or dismissed.'¹²

Having briefly defined underperformance and recognising an acceptance by principals in Lutheran schools to manage this, the question arises: how does Lutheran theology inform the way in which this phenomenon is handled in Lutheran schools?

Lutheran schools

Lutheran schools in Australia, because they are schools of the Lutheran Church of Australia, are faith-based schools and therefore this is a point of difference when compared with other schools and school systems. This difference, according to Bartsch, is exemplified in a set of core values and beliefs which do not change or are compromised, irrespective of the current educational context.¹³ Christenson takes this further when he discusses a specific Lutheran anthropology and epistemology, 'we are Lutheran by means of our educational vision, a theologically informed orientation that manifests itself in what we do as we learn and teach together and our understanding of why we do it.'¹⁴

It is therefore essential that principals of Lutheran schools have an understanding of these fundamental and core values and beliefs and that they have a theologically informed orientation that guides their practice. The Lutheran church has set theological expectations through its various policies for its leaders: they are to 'uphold the teachings of the church'¹⁵ and to 'have a clear understanding of the mission of the Lutheran school'.¹⁶

Primarily our schools are communities, upheld by the church and through whom the Holy Spirit works for witness and service. In 1 Peter 2:9 (NIV) we read, 'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.' Christians working in Lutheran schools, and also as members of the 'priesthood of all believers', share God's love as they live in relationship with all those they are called to serve. In

12 Paterson, *How Is Teacher Underperformance Constructed*, 146.

13 Malcolm Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts: Theology for Teachers in Lutheran Schools* (Adelaide: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), passim.

14 Tom Christenson, *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 28.

15 Commission on Theology and Interchurch Relations (CTICR), *The Lutheran Church of Australia and Its Schools*, Lutheran Church of Australia, Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions, Volume 2, Section J, Church-School Issues (2001), accessed 30 April 2021, www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/.

16 Lutheran Education Australia, 'Staffing policy for Lutheran schools,' 1, accessed 13 October 2015 <http://www.lutheran.edu.au/publications-and-policies/policies-and-guidelines/>.

these relationships God is at work guiding us and revealing His saving work as we lead and manage all manner of issues, including underperformance. Our interactions with others are based in the knowledge of God's love for them. A concept underpinned by our understanding of the doctrine of creation, whereby humans are identified as created in God's image.

The fostering of positive relationships between all individuals in the Lutheran school is fundamental to establishing and maintaining the school as a caring, supporting community. This provides the basis for pastoral care and for dealing with situations where relationships break down between individuals or within the community.¹⁷

In managing teacher underperformance (along with a broad array of other responsibilities), one is carrying out his/her vocation. It is the principal's responsibility as part of his/her vocation, as a leader in the school, to preserve God's creation so His purposes can be fulfilled. It is through our vocation and the 'mask' of leadership that we strive for good order.¹⁸ This may mean a difficult conversation or action needs to occur for good order in the classroom and the school.

Vocation relates to God's continuing creation and preservation of the world as He uses human beings as stewards within creation to carry out His purposes.¹⁹

The foundation of Lutheran education is the Gospel of Jesus Christ which informs all teaching and learning, all human relationships and all activities, and as such the view of underperformance and the manner in which it is handled should clearly be informed by the relevant theological teachings of the church.²⁰ Three of these doctrines are identified as being essential in dealing with this phenomenon: creation, the two kingdoms and grace.

Creation

In Genesis 1:27 we read that humans were created in the image of God. While our perfect relationship with God was fractured due to sin, each individual has worth and value in the eyes of God; we are unique and have distinctive characteristics, gifts, and abilities. Lutheran teaching thus emphasises that we are valued for who we are as God's children, not our utility.²¹ Recognising our vocation, or the service we undertake for others, is part of the Lutheran understanding of God's continuing creation where we use our gifts and talents to serve the needs of others.²² Such a belief emphasises the way members of a Lutheran school community are viewed and treated.

As leaders who reflect God's love in all our dealings with others, we continually need to remind ourselves that everyone matters because of God's love for them, not because of any inherent quality of their own. In dealing with an underperforming staff member,

17 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, 64.

18 *Ibid.*, 66.

19 *Ibid.*, 66.

20 CTICR, *The Lutheran Church of Australia and Its Schools*, 1.

21 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, 62.

22 *Ibid.*, 69.

we recognise that teacher underperformance is evidence of the human brokenness that goes with a fallen creation and points to Jesus Christ as the one who restores God's creation through his own life, death and resurrection (Revelation 21:5). In dealing with underperformance, we deal with the whole person because it is the whole person who underperforms.

The two kingdoms

A uniquely Lutheran perspective, the two kingdoms, or the two hands of God, provide a framework for understanding the two ways God works within the world. The left hand, the realm of justice, ensures that peace and good order are kept within the world (and in this context the school). It is recognised that there are accountabilities to governments and civil authorities and consequences for failing to follow these. From a school perspective, there are regulations to follow, curricula to be taught, teaching standards to be met, and behaviours to manage as the school serves the community and society.²³

The right hand is often depicted as the realm of mercy, where God operates through the church, the community of Christians, with the gospel of forgiveness. It is within this context that Christian practices (e.g. worship, confession, absolution) occur within Lutheran school settings.

For a principal, an understanding of the two kingdoms provides a lens on the dual vocational role and responsibilities under God. On the one hand there are pastoral responsibilities to the individual staff member with whom you are dealing, with justice and mercy: the right hand. This is, however, coupled with the need to address performance issues and enact appropriate consequences to support good order and respond to the needs of the community: the left hand.

Grace

As Christenson emphasises in discussing an understanding of grace, 'if anything is the central theme of Lutheranism it is this: we are justified by grace through faith.'²⁴ Put simply, Lutherans believe that there is nothing they can do to earn God's forgiveness for their sin; it has already been given through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are called to receive this through faith. Within the school community it is recognised that, while all people in the eyes of God are sinners, they have freely received this forgiveness.²⁵

As Christenson explains when speaking of church theology, 'grasping the Lutheran understanding of these gives an adequate view of what the Lutheran theological tradition is and how Lutherans think about things.'²⁶

As schools of the Lutheran Church of Australia, it is expected that all decisions and all actions are based in the gospel to make available, 'a formal education in which the gospel

23 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, passim.

24 Christenson, *The Gift and Task*, 45.

25 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, 86.

26 Christenson, *The Gift and Task*, 37.

of Jesus Christ informs all learning and teaching, all human relationships, and all activities in the school'.²⁷ It is then essential that principals in our schools have a clear understanding of and are able to subsequently apply these doctrines with compassion and certainty when handling teacher underperformance. A further role of the principal in a Lutheran school, that of spiritual leader, is acknowledged in the context of staff underperformance.

Spiritual leadership

While the principal works in the left-hand kingdom, managing and leading a school, the principal is also seen as the 'spiritual leader' of that community and therefore also works in the right-hand kingdom.²⁸ The application of Lutheran theology can manifest itself in a number of ways when dealing with underperformance.

In the research undertaken there was a strong correlation between managing underperformance, once identified or constructed by the principal, and the application of Lutheran theology. Two of the themes identified were relationships and motivation.²⁹

Relationships

Relationships with underperforming staff are seen as an important aspect in managing this phenomenon by principals and are grounded in the understanding of grace and creation. 'Although principals did stay in relationships with underperforming staff members, feel positive emotions such as being pastoral and supportive, and support underperforming teachers in their endeavours to change their behaviour, principals also felt that this came at a cost.'³⁰ I called this 'costly discipleship'. This term is based on the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of the use of grace in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*.³¹ In this book (first published in 1937) Bonhoeffer speaks about costly grace.

The emotional cost to the principal can be great, as they, as a disciple of Christ, graciously offer support and care for an underperforming teacher. At the same time, the principal operates with an understanding of another key Lutheran teaching, the two kingdoms. This teaching expects that the principal, while caring for the teacher who is underperforming, must ensure that the underperformance is attended to, so that good learning and order continue in the school. Living as a disciple of Jesus becomes costly (costly discipleship) to the principal, as dealing with underperformance and working towards an outcome can be perceived by the community as showing either weakness or harshness in leadership.

Motivation

The reasons a principal deals with an issue of underperformance and the attitudes which they display in doing so, were clearly expressed during the interview stage of the

27 (CTICR), *The Lutheran Church of Australia and Its Schools*, 1.

28 Bartsch, 'The principal as spiritual leader in the Lutheran school' (Lutheran Education Australia discussion paper 2014), accessed 28 April 2021, <http://growingdeep.lutheran.edu.au/assets/Principal-as-Spiritual-Leader.pdf>.

29 Paterson, *How Is Teacher Underperformance Constructed*, 127–129.

30 Paterson, *How Is Teacher Underperformance Constructed*, 137.

31 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2015).

research.³² While they identified a responsibility to the community to address the issue of underperformance, principals also expressed their desire to support the teacher who was underperforming so that they can flourish in both kingdoms. The Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, where, on the one hand, there are civil accountabilities and, on the other, the spiritual work of God is carried out, underpinned the principals' thinking on this theme.

This strong sense of responsibility to the school, however, was coupled with a desire to care for and support the teacher through the process of addressing underperformance, thus showing the right hand of God at work. Principals of Lutheran schools during this research spoke about having a responsibility to care for underperforming staff as they are children of God, but also to maintain standards and expectations of the school community.³³

Conclusion

The Lutheran church has strong and defined doctrinal statements that can inform the way we live our vocations. Principals of Lutheran schools, as spiritual leaders of their communities, have a wonderful opportunity to use these to guide and direct their leadership practice, not only when dealing with underperformance, but in every area of their leadership.

The three identified doctrines used in this article are considered useful in managing underperformance in staff. Research appears to show that many principals in Lutheran schools understand these doctrines and through relationships and a desire to care for the other apply them at some cost to themselves known as 'costly discipleship'.

It is imperative that we continue as a system of schools to train our principals in the theology of the church. This training needs to be coupled with continual rich and deep discussions on the intersection of theology and the school context. This will ensure that we will remain true to our system of schools and our Lutheran faith. As Nev Grieger reminds us, 'Part of the whole leadership expectation of a Lutheran school principal, is to ensure authenticity of our system; to ensure that the gospel and the theology are reflected through our daily operations.'³⁴

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32 Paterson, *How Is Teacher Underperformance Constructed*, 102–115.

33 Ibid., 128.

34 Neville Grieger, *Fuelling the Fire* (Adelaide: Lutheran Education Australia, 2020), 63.