

The Formation of Imperfect Teachers

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Introduction

Romans 7:14 (New Living Translation) states, “The trouble is with me, for I am all too human.” This provokes the questions: What is it with being human? Is there something inherently wrong with being human? Is this not even more thought-provoking for teachers, especially preservice teachers (PSTs), who are expected to be models of perfection?

PSTs are “humans” and they are “too human.” They are finite. Hence, they can never be perfect. There are several philosophical issues relative to human life that confront the formation of teachers. PSTs are in the process of “becoming” while simultaneously struggling with the limitations of their inherently imperfect nature. They have limits and may exhibit errors. Nevertheless, this paper argues that their imperfections do not imply incompetence. These inherent limitations, when properly addressed, can facilitate their development into effective teachers. In this regard, teacher education institutions (TEIs) should deviate from the goal of honing and producing perfect teachers because they do not exist. On the contrary, they should have the intentionality in making philosophically and ethically grounded reflections and pursue developing teachers, who are professionally competent precisely because they were given support in recognizing and working on their own imperfections.

The Imperfection of Preservice Teachers

Imperfection is an equivocal term. On one side, it refers to limits or natural boundaries as influenced by the existential finitude of being humans. On the other hand, it suggests errors or mistakes, which are caused by misjudgment, misinterpretation, or faulty reasoning.

Being “humans, all too humans,” PSTs are inherently imperfect. They have ontological imperfections implied by their existential being. They are constrained by their inherent boundaries. Moreover, they are psychically and rationally imperfect. This implies they are prone to committing mistakes. Nevertheless, these do not make them any less of a teacher provided that they continue to be committed towards personal and professional growth, and they are well provided with appropriate, holistic support.

Physical Limits

As humans, PSTs are a substance, a body, and an organism. As a substance, they have a physical body or form (Tomadaki, 2018; Verboon, 2014). They exist in bodily form, capable of physical activities. Their tangible body is the “general medium for having the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2018). Being physically

capable proved beneficial in performing the wide range of tasks required in their profession. During their coursework, PSTs should successfully pass all their subjects. When they are deployed for field practice, they are expected to plan flexible curricula, create varied learning resources, deliver quality instruction, give reinforcements, engage with stakeholders and design conducive classrooms for learners' holistic development. Undeniably, these tasks are physically demanding.

PSTs enroll in a maximum of eight courses per semester, each requiring at least one culminating course outcome in addition to other requirements. These courses focus on developing their mastery in "what" and "how" to teach. During their field practice, they are required to be on duty for a maximum of eight hours a day with a fraction of that time spent for actual teaching. Field evidence reveals that PSTs work before reporting to the office, during class hours, and beyond regular working hours. They write and rewrite lesson plans, prepare instructional resources, and teach on a daily basis. Most often, they do not have adequate rest as they are trying to address the demands of their professional training. Moreover, PSTs' tasks are not confined to teaching. They are also researchers, guidance counselors, event planners, first aiders, classroom designers, coaches, etc. The list seems unending, suggesting teachers are all-powerful and ever-present beings who can do all tasks simultaneously.

PSTs find it challenging to perform all tasks assigned to them. They are corporeal beings; hence, they are physically limited. According to Ricoeur (1967), it is man's very corporeal advantage that sets limits to them. They are not omnipresent nor omnipotent because their time, strength, speed, endurance, and attention are inherently limited. Humans have limits in their maximum sustained energy expenditure (Thurber et al., 2019). Their single body is "a vulnerable, fleshy, and decomposable substance" that becomes sick, deteriorates, and dies (Abrahamsson & Simpson, 2011). Hence, despite their commitment to accomplishing all assigned tasks, PSTs are unable to perform them simultaneously and flawlessly. This limit is even more challenging to overcome because of the fact that they are still learning to become teachers. They have limited experience on how the tasks are done effectively and efficiently.

Trying to exceptionally perform all duties and responsibilities tied to the teaching profession can lead to exhaustion and fatigue. What teachers do in class can immensely affect their emotional welfare even after class (Donker et al., 2023). As a result of the interplay of physical, emotional and cognitive pressures, teachers experience burnout (Madigan et al., 2023). Burnout can certainly lead to reduced performance quality, which makes teachers imperfect. However, failure to do all assigned tasks successfully does not suggest incompetence. This is because of natural limits they can do nothing about.

Cognitive Boundaries

PSTs, as human beings, possess cognitive capabilities that encompass a wide range of mental processes, enabling them to perceive, process, and respond to information. These capabilities include attention, memory, language comprehension, and learning.

The aforementioned capabilities complement the cognitive demands of the teaching profession, with the primary role of honing the minds of the learners. PSTs, as future mentors, are required to demonstrate mastery of subject matter to ensure that accurate concepts are taught to learners. Subject matter expertise is a commonly evaluated criterion among PSTs when they are tasked with teaching. This is consistent with teacher survey findings indicating that 98% believe PSTs should possess content knowledge even before having their own classrooms (Putman, 2021). Additionally, PSTs are not expected to commit errors, as these may perpetuate and be transmitted to subsequent generations. To address this demand, PSTs must successfully pass each course that hone their expertise on what they will be teaching.

PSTs can learn; however, this process is constrained by inherent cognitive limits in memory, attention, and information processing (Marois & Ivanoff, 2005). PSTs, as humans, have partial knowledge. They can never achieve perfect understanding of everything, including the subjects they teach. This idea corresponds with Isaac Newton's assertion that "What we know is a drop, what we don't know is an ocean." Human minds are composed of incomplete, inconsistent, and uncertain information (Collins et al., 1975).

This suggests that regardless of the number of courses PSTs take to develop expertise in the subjects they will teach, mastery cannot be guaranteed. Although they may have been taught the content, they may not have fully attended to it. They may have learned it, yet still forget it. Moreover, while they may have successfully passed the subject, a passing grade does not equate to mastery. Even the most prepared teacher cannot be expected to know everything about the subject they teach in a year (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2010). Overall, PSTs cannot be expected to perfectly possess all the required knowledge in their profession due to inherent cognitive limits. However, this does not imply incompetence, as these limitations reflect natural constraints of human cognition.

Psychic/Rational Errors

Alongside human complexity is the notion of the "soul," understood here as the psyche, as articulated by Aristotle in *On the Soul*. The soul is that which animates the human being (Aristotle, 1996) and is responsible for organizing and governing human behavior. It is traditionally described as comprising three interrelated faculties: reason, spirit, and appetite, which corresponds to intellect, will, and desire, respectively (Singpurwalla, 2010).

As human beings, PSTs are understood to possess a "soul" composed of reason, will, and appetite. Through reason, they can discern what is good, and through will, they are capable to act persistently toward the good, allowing reason to guide and regulate appetite. Conversely, due to the inherent limitations of human beings, they may commit psychological and rational errors in the operation of the "soul." First, due to cognitive constraints, they may misperceive what is good. Through the senses, humans become conscious individuals capable of perceiving the world and forming judgements. However, human senses are limited, and the mind interprets sensory information with a margin of error, often making inferences based on incomplete information. The human cognitive system is therefore fallible, shaped in part by inherent constraints, unconscious biases, and an inability to fully evaluate its own reliability (Cycleback, 2021). This account of the mind's subjective limitations aligns with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, which suggests that what humans perceive through the senses may not reflect reality itself. Taken together, these ideas imply that PSTs may also be prone to errors in meaning-making. In some instances, their interpretations may be influenced by cognitive limitations or contextual factors that hinder accurate understanding and connection with reality.

Additionally, due to their corporeal limitations and the physically demanding nature of teacher preparation, there are instances in which the choice to pursue and persist in the good may be undermined. In such cases, reason may fail to regulate the appetite, leading to distorted priorities and impaired decision-making. This reflects a potential tension within the soul, where appetite can become unruly while the will is expected to remain disciplined. In Aristotelian terms, the "soul" is tasked with orienting reason toward the consistent apprehension of the good; however, this harmony is not always achieved in practice. This condition may also be understood in relation to the broader claim that human cognition is limited in its capacity to deal with complex, multi-layered systems (Kutnyy, 2024).

For instance, PSTs may perceive a teaching approach to be effective but due to the human brain's inherent tendency to misinterpret, what has been perceived as effective may not actually be so. Similarly, although reason may lead PSTs to perceive a teaching approach as beneficial, the sustained enactment of that approach may prove physically and emotionally draining. Consequently, they may choose not to persist, instead yielding to more immediate appetitive desires or pleasures. In this instance, the senses may misperceive what is genuinely good, the appetite may draw individuals away from rational judgment, and reason itself may operate on incomplete or distorted information. Hence, the tripartite conception of the "soul" discloses the ways in which the rational, spirited, and desire-driven errors may manifest. Similar to the previously discussed inherent human limitations, these psychical and rational errors among PSTs should not be understood as evidence of incompetence; rather they can provide an avenue for learning and growth.

Nurturing the Imperfect Teachers

PSTs are imperfect despite their desire to achieve perfection. As human beings, they are subject to physical limits, cognitive boundaries, and psychical and rational mistakes. Agreeably, it is beneficial to accept limits and mistakes because these are inherently inevitable. Rather than signifying failure, they may be understood as opportunities for growth and transcendence. According to Narciss and Alemdag (2024), errors and failures are essential parts of learning, and errors can result in substantial learning potential when adequate support is provided (Köpfer, 2022). Hence, PSTs, including TEIs, should be equipped to engage appropriately with such imperfection.

PSTs can be nurtured through the appropriate pacing, strengthening, and tuning. Appropriate pacing entails recognizing where PSTs are and responding accordingly. This process should start by guiding PSTs toward self-awareness and reflection so that they can become well informed about their capabilities and limits. They should come to understand that limits cannot be avoided, however they can be engaged with proactively. With such awareness PSTs are better positioned to support themselves by taking necessary actions at an appropriate pace, without forcing nor pressuring themselves. Responding well to these realities requires not only that PSTs learn and engage their imperfections constructively, but also that TEIs provide the conditions in which such engagement becomes possible.

In turn, TEIs are responsible for providing appropriately paced and humanistic curricula. In doing so, they should primarily reflect on where PSTs are inherently since such understanding provides the basis for developing responsive teacher education programs. In light of PSTs' limits, TEIs should focus on what PSTs can realistically accomplish physically and mentally within a specific period of time without jeopardizing excellence. These inherent imperfections call for a more empathetic form of teacher training that emphasizes PSTs' wellbeing alongside their teaching effectiveness. For instance, it would be beneficial if the maximum academic units per semester and learning outcomes be reduced so that only the essentials are retained and redundant ones are removed. Additionally, tasks that could be completed just as effectively in groups should be encouraged.

Furthermore, nurturing imperfect teachers entails strengthening support in a holistic manner. PSTs are multidimensional beings with physical bodies, cognitive capabilities, and social and emotional intelligence and they should therefore be approached as a whole person. Given their imperfections, they should be provided with holistic well-being support. Teacher education is physically and mentally draining however, when accompanied with intentional, sustained and appropriate self-care, these demands can become more manageable.

Teacher preparation can be strengthened by ensuring that curricula are more responsive to the practical needs of PSTs. In particular, the curricula should be more pragmatic, ensuring alignment between theory and practice. PSTs should be given more opportunities to practice learning in a real-world setting. Beyond promoting theory-practice alignment, such opportunities should also meet licensure exam standards. Together, these measures help prepare PSTs for the challenges that lie ahead.

TEIs should also strengthen access to varied and adequate instructional resources that PSTs can use. These resources provide support in addressing the constraints PSTs can face. In particular, PSTs should be provided with opportunities to use appropriate resources that respond to their multisensory needs. As humans, PSTs have limited memory. However, when multisensory resources are available, retrieval of information from their memory improves because more senses are involved during encoding (Alhamdan et al., 2025). TEIs should also provide access to productivity-enhancing resources to help PSTs perform tasks with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Additionally, PSTs should be made consciously aware of the inherent errors they commit. These errors must be identified and addressed constructively by providing support on how these can be avoided in the future. Hence, providing clear and constant correction and feedback needs to be strengthened. In line with this, teacher education curricula should include a course specifically focused on developing and

applying metacognitive strategies. This will equip PSTs with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitude for them to effectively monitor and regulate their learning.

Nurturing imperfect teachers also calls for fine tuning in teacher education. It is crucial for TEIs to recalibrate its curricula by incorporating effective and ethical use of technological advancements. Artificial Intelligence (AI) should be included among the vital courses in the curricula, alongside intensified Information and Communication Technology (ICT) courses, which are integrated within and across disciplines. This integration should go beyond digital and AI literacy by specifically emphasizing the practical application of AI in teacher education, including lesson planning, test construction and grading, classroom management techniques, and other pedagogical integration. Moreover, PSTs should be urged to constantly and ethically use these advancements to improve efficiency, capabilities and performance in various tasks. Moreover, evaluative standards need an overhaul. Nearly all evaluation systems in teacher education assign the highest grade to perfect performance. Implicit in these systems is the assumption that excellence means perfection, which contradicts the inherently imperfect nature of PSTs. TEIs, therefore, should modify these evaluative standards by allowing a minimal margin of error when assigning the highest grade, thereby aligning with the inherent nature of PST learning and development. As regards the appetitive dimension of the tripartite “soul,” which often overrides rational judgment, professional education courses should also be reframed accordingly. PSTs should develop explicit awareness of the appetitive dimension. The appetitive dimension should not be eliminated but disciplined by highlighting professional responsibility.

Imperfect teachers need to be nurtured from where they are to what they are capable of becoming through proper pacing, strengthening, and fine-tuning of the teacher education curricula. This is a challenging task that needs empathy and support from various stakeholders. Nevertheless, when PSTs’ imperfections are recognized as normal and manageable, TEIs can produce effective teachers who, in turn, will be more empathetic in teaching and supporting imperfect learners.

Conclusion

PSTs are human beings and, as such, are unavoidably marked by imperfection. Yet this imperfection should not be construed as evidence of deficiency, incapacity, or professional inadequacy. Rather, it may be understood as a constitutive condition of human becoming, a sight from which reflection, self-correction, and transcendence emerge. From this perspective PSTs’ imperfections are not signs of weakness nor incompetence, they are not disqualified by their limitations; instead, they are called to engage them critically and constructively through appropriate pedagogical, emotional, and institutional support. Their potential for effectiveness lies precisely in their capacity for self-overcoming and self-formation, that is in their ability to move beyond what seems to limit them. PSTs are therefore dynamic subjects, shaped not only by what they are, but also by what they are in the process of becoming. Knowing this complexity leads to the redesigning of teacher education, one that is more humane, philosophically grounded and developmentally responsive. If teacher education institutions are to cultivate genuinely effective educators, they must attend not an idealized fiction of perfection, but to the lived reality of human finitude and possibility that defines the becoming of every teacher. This calls for a more humane teacher training because PSTs are humans, all too humans.

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