

Review of

Reimagining the Call to Teach: A Witness to Teachers and Teaching

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Building on the Person Project

Reimagining the Call to Teach extends Professor David Hansen's highly respected scholarship concerning the moral dimensions of teaching, building helpfully on his earlier work the *Call to Teach* (1995) combined with subsequent work on the significance of cosmopolitanism (Hansen, 2011) in education. As before, he draws on time spent in the field "being with" teachers, consistent with his philosophically informed approach to collecting empirical data. This time a larger group of 16 experienced practitioners, situated in metropolitan, multicultural schools, both primary and secondary, provide the focus of that process. Hansen describes the study as a "Person Project," understood as an act of "bearing witness" to the fusion of "teacher" and "person" in his subjects' working lives. His aim is to attend to two fundamental questions which have regard for "the meaning of education and of teaching, and for the conduct of life itself" (Hansen, 2021, p. 52): what it is to be and to become a person through education, and what it means to be and become a person in the role of a teacher. These sincerely stated intentions signal the qualities readers will appreciate throughout. Our review focuses on the progression of Hansen's ideas from the original *Call to Teach* in his new book, highlighting key terms and their development in relation to the theoretical assumptions, methodology, and findings of his "Person Project."

In the opening chapters, Hansen re-examines established concepts to define the "vocational" nature of teaching, which, he reminds us, entails showing or instructing – providing signs or outward expressions of something one knows (p. 1) – that leads others into a state of new knowing. Thus, teachers engage with others in a form of service, positioned by Hansen at a crossroads, or third space, somewhere between public service and technically focused work. While recognizing the importance of the vocational in teaching in a practical, craft-like sense, Hansen asserts its ideological dimension too, in the quasi-religious sense of a vocation. He describes the role of teacher as one that is to be inhabited, lived so deeply and fully it becomes constitutive of the person themselves. He extends his previous discussion of this theme by arguing that the call to teach leans into soulfulness, passion, and authenticity, including the suffering entailed when ideals must be compromised.

Current conceptualizations of morality in a teacher's role, caught up in managerialist discourses, do not attend to the intensely idealistic view of teaching that Hansen describes, driven by what he terms its "commanding-ness" (p. 5); arguably there is a greater divide now than when the *Call to Teach* was originally written. However, such a sense of drive and urgency is necessary, he maintains, if teachers are to connect fully to what teaching entails according to other traditions of being and teaching – that is, saturated with moral meaning – which place qualities of attunement, receptivity, and *being with* others as central to teaching. One concern we have is for the reader for whom such sentiments do not resonate,

either with their experiences of teaching as a practice or their in-principle understanding of what teaching entails. They might read these words and feel overwhelmed, disheartened, incredulous even, at what Hansen expects of teachers, dwelling in their way of conduct such that the technical aspects of the role become informed by passion and a “feeling for the truth” by which they should live, which is easily not “reducible to an answer” (p. 32). Such instincts, Hansen maintains, drawing on John Dewey, are “rooted in primary experience ... preanalytical and precognitive” (p. 35). These high existential expectations are not ones that all teachers will recognize or accept. And school systems rely on teachers for whom teaching is just a job to sustain educational provision in bulk.

Hansen pursues the teacher’s relationship with theory in practice in chapter 3. Given the practice of regular self-cultivation required to sustain the high ideal of teaching being proposed, the arts have a pivotal part to play in this account, with metaphor and poetry particularly potent in “rendering the call to teach faithfully” (p. 50). Hansen describes the Person Project that lies at the heart of the book in some procedural detail here, his “bearing witness” to teaching being a distinctive “way of looking and knowing” enabling him to understand, and amplify, the call to teach as experienced by his participants (p. 57). He has attuned himself to the morally loaded minutiae of daily teaching and the quality of commitment informing these ethically minded teachers and their practices. Consistent with his understanding of “theory,” Hansen draws widely on the explanatory power of poetry, religion, art, literature, and film, inviting readers to do likewise, to attend to “resonant particulars” in what teachers are saying, thinking, and doing. The term, he explains, captures that which brings the “*being* of a human being ... into presence,” gathering “the wholeness of a person” in a glimpse of revelation (p. 65). Such insights are found in otherwise overlooked “ordinary, everyday and quiet” moments sought out by the faithful witness of teaching (pp. 67–69).

Findings sketched in chapter 4 begin with the observation that “bearing witness” to teaching itself is a calling and ethical orientation, requiring deep concern and a sense of “wonderment” for the dignity of the teacher and teaching itself to be seen and recorded (p. 78). By contrast, Hansen’s resistance to the language of social scientific processes is striking, likening himself to a “connoisseur” (p. 88) of educational practice, using metaphors which draw on aesthetic ways of being and acting in the world. But he emphasises the need for multiple points of immersion in the field and the reflexive process (p. 89). One participant (Earl) contrasts being observed in this project with previous experiences in professional development, extolling the distinctive benefits of the Person Project as a “fruitful inquiry” bringing philosophy into the “natural home” of the classroom (p. 85). Such testimony might be useful for others seeking to reform professional learning for teachers through engaging with philosophy.

We applaud Hansen’s commitment to centring teachers’ voices in chapter 5 and the evidence of moral sensibility shining through their words. A teacher named Joyce explains: “I’m trying to find a way to somehow ... be creative and enjoy my time with my students, given these imposed curriculum[s].... I’m still trying to figure out how I can apply my philosophy and my vision in this sort of setting. And it’s a challenge.... But that’s why I’m still here” (p. 96). The Person Project is rooted in “questions of what it means to be a person in the world today, juxtaposed with the question of what it means to be a person in the role of the teacher” (p. 108). It has fed Joyce’s determination to follow her ideals, which in turn sustains her work with students. Likewise, a teacher named Cora reflects:

When it comes to being an educator, this, the lack of concrete fruit, is the hardest for me to accept.... [W]hen we deal with people, there’s no such thing as an end result. Letting go of the need to reach a concrete goal is ... part of my evolution as a teacher. (p. 100)

Testimonials are grouped by themes, including “attunement” (p. 100), “vitality” (p. 104), and “passion” (p. 113). Hansen explains how he came to them when reflecting on what he had seen and heard, and how these overlapped. The subheadings enable readers to better appreciate, he hopes, “more than merely the sum of their parts” (p. 94).

In his final chapter, Hansen dwells on questions and uncertainties for the integrity of the teacher, recognizing that these are interconnected with the personhood of students, and considers how self-cultivation through reflection and engagement with the arts in community can strengthen teachers’

connection to higher educational endeavours. He concludes that the “witness-mentor” approach of the Person Project can help teachers to “reimagine the endless educational possibilities immanent in the practice of teaching” (p. 140) through cultivating a humanizing approach, in which the “greatest need” being addressed is sustaining teachers’ wellbeing and offering all the resources possible to strengthen “their fundamental educational integrity” (p. 140), particularly regarding injustice.

In this regard, Hansen addresses cultural bias in the final sections, including ways in which “teaching as an ethical practice ... ideally a calling” (p. 137), might develop “counter habits” that support social justice, empowering and centring teachers “as persons in the role, rather than as mere functionaries” (p. 137). He goes so far as to suggest that teacher performance assessment, understood from the perspective of bearing witness, provides a panacea for the dehumanizing and procedural nature of conventional teacher education. He achieves at least two (significant) objectives established at the outset: explaining and developing a philosophical method of empirical engagement with teachers, and making manifest the quality of ethical commitment found in the working lives of teachers he has observed. Again, Cora’s reflections show how intimately the teacher’s life is bound up in relationships:

whatever baggage or vision or whatever you have in your private life, that is just here on display ‘cause you have 140 different people ... pushing different buttons and triggering different things that you’ve been through in your life ... you have to be aware of who you are and how who you are is being played out in the classroom. (p. 98)

We have shared examples of Hansen capturing the idiomatic language that teachers use to express their personal stories and knowledge insightfully, yet with inevitable imprecision, consistent with the commitment to the register of metaphor and poetry. In other places, however, the reader may not sense the “radiance” or “hidden vibrations of meaning” (p. 91) of vignettes he has selected with the same degree of resonance. Having been present in the moment to share such direct insights in “ethical proximity” (p. 93), perhaps the connections for him are clearer and more compelling.

The Person Project honours the lives of 16 teachers, attending to their uniqueness, reflecting the constitutive influence of culture, gender, sexual orientation, history, consciousness, values, and context on teachers’ identities. They range widely in years of professional experience. Details are included, for example, about schools’ racial demographic, size, and grade focus, to give a sense of teachers’ working conditions (p. 55). Future work would benefit from more nuanced reflection on whether participants all identify as cisgender and binary, given the masculine- and feminine-associated pseudonyms being used throughout, alongside experiences of bi-cultural teachers, and how these translate into vocational commitment. The challenges teachers describe resonate with our perceptions of other contexts. In Australia, the pandemic has only exacerbated existing stresses on teachers during a dire teacher shortage (Gore, 2022), due as much to attrition and exhaustion from the profession as insufficient recruitment of new teachers (Clark, 2022). In England, in July 2022, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders Geoff Barton reported teacher recruitment and retention to be at a crisis point, following a survey of members (see Education Executive, 2022).

Understanding the impact of such demoralization (Santoro, 2018), Hansen takes care to show how each teacher to whom he bears witness is an exceptional and unique being. Take a teacher named Merritt, who presents a uniquely marginalized professional identity in his philosophy of teaching:

I think it has to do with the noticing of injustice at an early age ... growing up gay and Asian and Chinese in a predominantly White and homophobic community... I developed as a person before seeing teaching as something I wanted to do, because I wanted to change things. And once that kind of intersection happens, then teaching never quite remains as a job, if the force of your life’s work has to do with larger social issues. (p. 97)

Hansen’s sensibility towards cultural difference is stronger here than was the case in his earlier work, expressed in terms of how people “hold and enact their cultural, moral, religious, aesthetic, and other values” (p. 43). This new awareness starts with the original cover, a New England classroom scene

(retained, but inside the volume) displaced by the painting “Sunday Morning in Virginia,” by Winslow Homer, bearing witness to a teacher who is Black, engaged with two African American children, while a third child, also Black, looks away wistfully into the distance. Hansen’s thesis rests on the unique and potentially formidable contribution of every teacher, asserting that:

no human being anywhere, anytime, is simply a walking intersection point of cultural, social, or biological markers ... reducible to an effect of such categories.... Singularity is a central ethical quality of every person.... We might call it “saturated” ... given the indescribable uniqueness of each human being’s sojourn on this earth, however few or however many years it has been. (p. 44)

Turning this point around, though, can any of us who (like Hansen) identify as “White” confidently argue that those multiple possible factors contributing to teachers’ identities can in practice be set aside to focus on an individual person’s uniqueness? How reflexive can we be when bearing witness to the experience of the other? We concur with Hansen that dominant teacher education discourses fail to attend sufficiently to the relational and personal, but suggest that “blindness” to difference is unwise. Rather, building on Hansen’s first steps in the right direction, further re-imagining the *Call to Teach* as a “People” rather than “Person” Project might engage a wider range of witnesses, rooted in other ways of being and thinking, to extend the process. Such a move would also bring back into range the (unequal and potentially unjust) influence of structural difference on some people.

Those wider forces at play disadvantage some teachers more than others, affecting their moral motivations and actions as teachers. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are often, like other marginalized groups, expected to leave their culture and ways of being at the school gates (Perkins & Shay, 2022). Were there assumptions like this influencing any of Hansen’s participants – and if there were, how might we know? Bearing witness to teachers’ personhood in ways that acknowledge cultural plurality should involve a broader cross-section of teachers and witnesses situated within other areas of knowledge and experiences. The change of cover image is a significant gesture, but not yet reflective of the subjects of the study or the witness they bear.

As well as the teachers themselves, a “People Project” might also draw on a broader range of sources to interpret and make meaning from the vignettes that are gathered, reflecting developments in literature which draw widely on other ways of living and being. For example, Elie Wiesel, also a self-described “witness,” spent a lifetime ensuring that humanitarian suffering was never forgotten, a legacy that some have described as a “methodology of wonder” (Burger, 2018, p. 233). Greater attention should also be paid to relevant scholarship by theorizing Black, Asian, and Indigenous scholars, present, for example, in doctoral studies (Montgomery, 2019).

Having taken nine years to complete, based on hundreds of hours of researcher-participant interaction, alongside conceptual development, *Reimagining the Call to Teach* is a rich and insightful work. Readers will readily appreciate the rigour of Hansen-as-witness; we are certainly inspired to explore the methodology he develops, although we suspect his ground-breaking work may benefit from further engagement with the expertise displayed in other forms of empirical research undertaken in education most amenable to the arts and humanities. For example, the development of a People/Person Project might benefit from the insights of ethnographers (e.g., Gatti, 2014) interested in capturing the lives of teachers, including narrative (e.g., Bannister, 2020) and life histories studies (e.g., Goodson et al., 2017), from which this project is currently detached.

This said, the Person Project offers a clear way forward for philosophers of education to engage in mutually beneficial academic exchanges with colleagues in teacher education immersed typically in more empirically driven research. We have a careful and comprehensive account of how Hansen scaled up his initial explorations, through planning, enactment, and reflection, to writing up the findings. We have noted limitations to the Person Project, but do not underestimate the scale of Hansen’s achievement or its significance. Given a need to attract teacher educators to philosophy, focusing on experience, while remaining true to a philosophical orientation, Hansen has offered us a touchstone.

This book reconnects us with the reasons why notions of vocational purpose continue to matter, making an original contribution to scholarship which challenges instrumental understandings of teaching in education systems across the world. It offers one rigorously thought through and carefully conducted approach by which philosophers of education can continue to engage meaningfully with teaching practice and capture their insights systematically. In doing so, Hansen draws on over 30 years of writing and troubling to notice the daily lives of teachers. It is a compelling, close account and a testimony to their ongoing integrity, despite the challenges.

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