Called into Crucible:
Vocation and Moral Injury in Public School Teachers

This is an exploration of the psycho-spiritual concept of moral injury (MI) in public school settings. Many teachers must enforce practices (high-stakes standardized testing, suspension, etc.) that data suggest are unlikely to help children in the long run. Teachers enter their profession responding to a sense of call to do good and yet can encounter situations where they are expected to do and support actions that they think might be detrimental to the youth in their care. As a result of these converging vectors sometimes there is tension and fracture: on a regular basis, many teachers go to work knowing that they will encounter circumstances that challenge their moral conscience, identity, and the values that got them into teaching in the first place. This is a form of MI. Through an engagement with MI literature and scholarship from education, religious education, and spirituality studies, I argue that MI ought to be included in (1) teacher training programs, (2) the ongoing support of teachers who find themselves in morally injurious contexts, and (3) the development of policy that impacts educational and pedagogical mandates.
Parker Palmer opens his essay “Evoking the Spirit in Public Education” by noting that while he is a firm advocate for the US separation of Church and State he nonetheless believes that our schools are poorer as a result of excluding conversations about spirituality from the classroom. From my vantage point as a former high school and middle school teacher, I agree entirely.

As a teacher, I have seen the price we pay for a system of education so fearful of things spiritual that it fails to address the real issues of our lives—dispensing facts at the expense of meaning, information at the expense of wisdom. The price is a school system that alienates and dulls us, that graduates young people who have had no mentoring in the questions that both enliven and vex the human spirit. I reject the imposition of any form of religion in public education, including so-called “school prayer.” But I advocate any way we can find to explore the spiritual dimension of teaching, learning, and living.¹

Though such conversations are usually marginal to most discourse about US public schooling, when they do occur they largely orbit about the spirituality of children.² Palmer suggests that “the spiritual is always present in public education whether we acknowledge it or not”³ and that all the academic disciplines already always have spirituality embedded within them. It is not something that needs to be amended to the content at some later date. I agree, though for the purposes of this paper it is more important to turn to the teachers rather than the students or the curriculum.

While the dialogue pertaining to spirituality and education is increasing, it is certainly far from normative. It is even less common to have that conversation turn to focus on teachers and how their spiritual worlds support and nurture their craft. Rarer still is any attention paid to the spiritual struggles of the teaching profession. This paper does exactly that, examining the ways in which entry into public education resonates with ideas around vocation and what it means when one’s vocation is stymied by the very same system that was thought to be one of support.

**Teaching, Vocation, and Spirituality**

Education scholar Laura Jones writes that “Spirituality in education refers to no more — and no less — than a deep connection between student, teacher, and subject — a connection so honest, vital, and vibrant that it cannot help but be intensely relevant,” arguing that “nourishment of this

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¹ Palmer, 6
³ Palmer (1999, 8)
spark in the classroom allows it to flourish in the world, in the arenas of politics, medicine, engineering — wherever our students go after graduation.”

This is resonant with Palmer’s definition of spirituality as “the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos,” as well as Mary Elizabeth Moore’s claim that education is self-development that “reflects the interrelated world and fosters our relationships with the world,” so that we become more able “to see the world from others’ perspectives.”

To teach is to be turned out beyond oneself for the benefit of others. Thus, while it may be appropriate to say that education can be seen as a spiritual practice in general it is also the case that it bears some resemblance to a spiritual vocation in particular.

The decision to enter into the teaching profession is rarely one of coincidence. The job of a teacher is one into which people are “called” and this is fact more than colloquialism. Data suggests that only 12% of new teachers self-report that they “fell into a career in education by chance” and of those who willfully and deliberately entered into the profession, 86% agreed with the statement that “only those with a true sense of calling should pursue the work.”

This suggests that those entering into education usually do so for reasons beyond their own self-gratification, monetary compensation, or social prestige. They do it for reasons of responsibility, service, or hope. They do it because they feel called: it is a spiritual vocation — in Palmer’s sense — even if the teacher herself is not confessionally religious.

Educator Scott Thompson writes of teaching as vocation as well, forwarding the idea that “educators are called to the sacred work of leading forth our children, unfolding the potential that lies within each child.” Patrick Reyes defines Christian vocation as “God’s call to new life for all creation,” and extracting a non-confessional framing from this gives us something like vocation as “a calling to new life.” Vocation is that which grips us and inspires us to wake up and make a difference, to order our lives so that we might flourish and, in turn, call others into a greater flourishing of life. There is a sense of education as vocation that functions regardless of explicit religious belief or disbelief.

A vocation is a calling... A person with a vocation is not devoted to civil rights, or curing a disease, or writing a great novel, or running a humane company because it meets some cost-benefit analysis. Such people submit to their vocations for reasons deeper and higher than utility and they cling to them all the more fiercely the more difficulties arise.

But if you serve the work — if you perform each task to its utmost perfection — then you will experience the deep satisfaction of craftsmanship and you will end up serving the community more richly than you could have consciously planned. And one sees this in people with a vocation — a certain rapt expression, a hungry desire to perform a dance or run an organization to its utmost perfection. They feel the joy of having their values in deep harmony with their behavior.

4 Jones, “What is?,” 1.
6 Moore, “Narrative Teaching,” 258.
7 Farkas. Et al A Sense of Calling, 10-11.
8 Thompson
9 Nobody Cries When We Die, forthcoming
Vocation is the work that feels given to us by something beyond ourselves. It compels us to serve and to sometimes be courageous. But what happens when a “hungry desire” to teach is stunted? What if something stands in the ways of the “deep harmony” between values and their action? What happens when teachers who feel that teaching is a call cannot teach?

The Other Side of the Coin

Though there is a slowly growing body of literature dedicated to exploring the benefits of spirituality in education, the negative consequences of that spirituality is rarely acknowledged. That is, because the profession itself is often bound up with an individual’s sense of call, meeting structural challenges in the classroom can be personal, even spiritually so. Moreover, succumbing to those challenges can feel like a spiritual loss as well. Thompson writes about this very issue, and though his conclusion is harsher than I would argue, his point is worth considering.

The temptations to compromise one’s integrity abound in the current educational environment. An unintended consequence of high-stakes, test-driven pressures for improving student outcomes, for example, is the growing temptation to push out — or fail to notice when they are preparing to drop out — those students who are most likely to drag down overall scores or scores within subgroups. Succumbing to this pressure is a sure indicator of moral purposelessness and cowardice.\footnote{11}

While I agree that there are certainly many trends within public education that challenge an educator’s ability to remain in integrity, I balk at placing the entirety of the blame on the failings of individual teachers and their “moral purposelessness.” For example, consider the situation regarding disciplinary suspension in schools.

The US. Department of Education recently released data showing that while 18% of African-American boys in kindergarten through 12th grade across the US. were suspended from school during the 2013-14 year, only 5% of white boys were during the same period.\footnote{12} We also know that young adults with “a history of suspension in school are less likely than others to vote and volunteer in civic activities after high school,”\footnote{13} and a 2005 study from The Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University found that having one or more school disciplinary referrals is “the single greatest predictor of future involvement in the juvenile justice system.”\footnote{14}

Evidence suggests that the rise of suspensions is tied to “zero-tolerance”\footnote{15} educational policies that mandate harsh punishments for certain classes of behavioral infraction and yet — damningly — research shows that “extreme disciplinary reactions are resulting in higher rates of...
repeat offenses and dropout rates.” In fact, the US. Department of Education has explicitly referenced no less than thirteen separate studies that show that “suspensions are associated with negative student outcomes such as lower academic performance, higher rates of dropout, failures to graduate on time, decreased academic engagement, and future disciplinary exclusion.” Even the American Psychological Association has a task force on zero tolerance policies for schools and they conclude that they “may negatively affect the relationship of education with juvenile justice and appear to conflict to some degree with current best knowledge concerning adolescent development.” And yet there are still schools with zero-tolerance policies and high suspension rates...

Imagine then, that you are a first year teacher in Cityville High, that you are among the 86% of teachers that feel “only those with a true sense of calling should pursue the work,” that your work feels like a vocation to you, that you know these statistics, and you learn that beginning in September you are expected to comply with your school’s new “one strike” policy. Youth violence has been on the rise and your new employer has decided to respond with “tough love” tactics. Non-compliance means that your job could be at risk. What do you do? Why do you do it? The pressure and heat on you is immediate. How do you respond?

Situations are rarely this cut-and-dry and there may well be more moderate responses than the extremes of complete compliance or resistance, and yet, this situation is hardly difficult to imagine. Plus, whether the issue is zero-tolerance discipline, the huge attention currently paid to high-stakes standardized testing, or any of a number of hot button issues, the tension remains: teachers often find themselves bound and caught between their sense of call and personal commitment to serve children and their need to follow organizational mandates. If you are a teacher and there is an educational mandate that you think doesn’t serve the children in your care and you are required to follow it I do not think that doing so is “a sure indicator of moral purposelessness and cowardice.” However, something serious is certainly going on there in Cityville and the situation is widespread.

The Metlife Survey of the American Teacher, comprised of annual data from 1984 to 2012, indicates that at a national level teacher job satisfaction has been on a steep and consistent decline. In 2008 the satisfaction figure was 62% but by 2012 data showed the lowest levels of job satisfaction in twenty-five years: only 39% of the national sample of teachers said that they were satisfied with their jobs. Similarly, the US. Department of Education’s “Teacher Follow-up Survey” shows that the number of teachers leaving the teaching profession has markedly risen

17 US Department of Education, “School Climate and Discipline.”
18 APA, “Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?”
19 For example, Sandford Borins’ Innovating with Integrity: How Local Heroes Are Transforming American Government details the work of teachers and administrators who were part of the Massachusetts’ Student Conflict Resolution Experts Program and the way that they strategically built partnerships and coalitions to advocate and transform policy. Likewise, Meira Levinson’s Justice in Schools Project is at work to develop interventions that are actionable: http://www.justiceinschools.org/aboutus
since 1991. Something is at work across the profession, and while there is no undeniable data to point with certainty to the cause, there has certainly been speculation.

Houston Sarratt, an educator from Nashville says that “teachers are frustrated by lack of autonomy, lack of choices, and top-down control.” Another, from Florida, has left the profession, noting in her resignation letter that “I have become more and more disturbed by the misguided reforms taking place which are robbing my students of a developmentally appropriate education…. I just cannot justify making students cry anymore…. Their shoulders slump with defeat as they are put in front of poorly written tests that they cannot read…. There’s no joy in it.” Finally, consider the words of Louisiana teacher Alice Trosclair, who wrote an article for The Educator’s Room suggesting a number of reasons why she sees new teachers leaving the profession.

Fresh-out-of-college teachers... have a mistaken sense of what is waiting for them in the classroom. With idealistic professors and inspiring true stories motivating them, they set out to save every student and change the world. We all want to do that. Then we enter the classroom and discover that not all students want to be saved and teaching is no longer standing on desk top and yelling out “Oh captain, my captain!” Standards must be met and understood. Formal assessments and benchmark tests abound. Data must be collected and analyzed... It can be overwhelming to balance teaching, paperwork, and a personal life.

People who have dedicated their lives to education and to teacher training now wonder if they can rightly encourage others to enter the field. Teachers report feeling adrift, overwhelmed, and frozen in the face of some challenges. Nonetheless, while there are certainly multiple factors at play in the declining satisfaction of teachers, I do not think that “moral purposelessness and cowardice” are among them. I believe that something else is going on.

Given that so many teachers enter into the profession as a result their experience of call, a failure to thrive in the professional context is bound up with a sense of failure of call. My argument is that because so many teachers conceive of their profession as vocation, the challenges of the job and their struggles with success are experienced dually as both professionally and spiritually difficult. Furthermore, there is a binding that catches at the intersection of a personal sense of vocation and structural dynamics that challenge the ability of teachers to live into that call with integrity. The moral fabric of American teachers is not diminishing: the pressures upon that fabric are increasing. The teaching profession is a crucible in which one’s sense of call is tested and the heat is rising. As a result, sometimes this binding produces a kind of internal tension and fracture, a decrease in our ability to encourage “deep connection between student, teacher, and subject,” and some damage is done to our sense of spirituality in education. That is, on a regular basis, many teachers go to work knowing that they

22 Thomas, “Why Teachers Quit.”
23 Thomas, “Why Teachers Quit.”
24 Trosclair, “Why Teachers Leave.”
will encounter circumstances that challenge their moral conscience, vocational identity, and the values that got them into teaching in the first place. There are – in short – instances of moral injury which regularly occur in classrooms across this country.

**Moral Injury and the Classroom**

The psycho-spiritual construct of “moral injury” (MI) was first developed to address circumstances emerging from US military contexts. The Moral Injury Project of Syracuse provides this definition:

> **Within the context of military service, particularly regarding the experience of war, “moral injury” refers to the emotional and spiritual impact of participating in, witnessing, and/or being victimized by actions and behaviors which violate a service member’s core moral values and behavioral expectations of self or others. Moral injury almost always pivots with the dimension of time: moral codes evolve alongside identities, and transitions inform perspectives that form new conclusions about old events.**

Drescher et al. articulate MI as a “disruption in an individual’s confidence and expectations about one’s own or others’ motivation or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner” and Silver refers to MI as “a deep soul wound that pierces a person’s identity, sense of morality and relationship to society.” The US. Department of Veteran Affairs offers that “events are considered morally injurious if they ‘transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations’... [and] thus, the key precondition for moral injury is an act of transgression, which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth.” Jonathan Shay has a more succinct definition:

> **Moral Injury is**
> 1. Betrayal of what’s right
> 2. by someone who holds legitimate authority
> 3. in a high stakes situation.
> All three...

You can see that my 1-2-3 definition includes the brain as well, because the body codes moral injury as physical attack: 1] Betrayal of what’s right — that’s squarely in the culture; 2] by someone who holds legitimate authority — that’s squarely in the social system; 3] in a high stakes situation — that’s inevitably in the mind of the service member being injured, such as the love he has for his buddy. The whole human critter is in play here: body, mind, social system, culture.

25 The phrase “moral injury” itself is believed to begin with the work of Vietnam War veteran and peace activist Camillo “Mac” Bica (Brock & Lettini, 2012; Bica, 1999, 2014).
26 Moral Injury Project, “What is Moral Injury?”
28 Silver, “Beyond PTSD.”
29 National Center for PTSD, “Moral Injury in the Context of War.”
To date, almost all the literature on MI has pertained to the military, however, if the construct is valid then we should expect to see MI other places where there is “[1] Betrayal of what’s right [2] by someone who holds legitimate authority [3] in a high stakes situation.” It follows, then, that in circumstances of MI outside of the military we should also see some of the negative effects associated with it, such as “guilt, shame, alienation, reduced trust in others, aggression, poor self-care and self-harm” as well as “changes in or loss of spirituality, problems with forgiveness, and depression.” To this end, in 2014, the Moral Injury Working Group of the American Academy of Religion themed its session as “Extending Moral Injury: Examining Moral Injury as an Interdisciplinary Resource for Scholars and Practitioners.” To my knowledge, that gathering was the first large-scale consideration of non-military MI, focusing on systems pertaining to societal racism, immigration, and prison systems.

I was present in the San Diego conference room during that session and had a slow-building feeling of dulling dread develop in the pit of my stomach: what one of the speakers described happening to guards in prison settings could be said of many teachers that I knew. A daily struggle between a desire to feel like you are part of a system that produces good in the world and piercing evidence to the contrary. Feelings of uneasiness, frustration, and defeat. Ultimately, a hardening of compassion or an exit from the profession.

Do I think that military MI and educational MI are entirely congruent? No. For example, compared by profession the lowest reported 2016 suicide rate — 7.5 per 100,000 — was among education, training, and library workers. Conversely, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) the suicide rate among veterans of all wars averages almost one per hour. And yet, there seem to be similarities which cannot be easily dismissed. If there were to be some numerical metric of assessment my guess would be that educational MI is both less pronounced than military MI on a case-by-case basis and more widely spread. That is, while the severity of each instance of educational MI might not be as profound as in other contexts, the sheer volume of its presence makes it worthy of commentary. Consider Shay’s description of the effects of MI on those experiencing it.

[It] deteriorates their character; their ideals, ambitions, and attachments begin to change and shrink…. moral injury destroy[s] the capacity for trust... [and] when social trust is destroyed, it is replaced by the settled expectancy of harm, exploitation, and humiliation from others. With this expectancy, there are few options: strike first, withdraw and isolate oneself from others, or create deceptions, distractions, false identities to forestall what is expected.

31 Drescher et al., 2011; Litz et al., 2009. As cited in Chaplo, “Harm from Harm,” 2.
32 Currier, Drescher, & Harris, 2014; Drescher et al., 2011. As cited in Chaplo, “Harm from Harm,” 2.
33 https://papers.aarweb.org/AAR-Sessions-Mon.pdf
34 Brooks, “Jobs With Highest Suicide Rates Identified.”
36 I am aware that some scholars want to reserve the term “moral injury” for exclusive reference to the most profound instances of MI, discounting “less significant” instances of it from being counted as MI. For these scholars educational MI would likely not count. However, in lieu of forcing another neologism along the lines of “minute moral injury” or some such contrivance, I proceed assuming that MI exists along on a continuum.
This is very much the sense of things we hear in narratives like that of a teacher from Gainsville, GA, who not only spent years in a public school classroom but also in the college setting of a teacher training program.

I recently retired from 18 years of teaching future teachers. I have been so distraught about the state of our education system in Georgia for many years, but especially the last few, that I have now found it very difficult to encourage students to get into the profession that I have loved and supported for my entire life. That is one of the reasons that I retired. I could no longer tell students to follow their passion into this world that for most of them will be exhausting, frustrating and ridiculously challenging.

Her “capacity for trust” has been so damaged that she can no longer even support the idea that others should enter into the profession at all. What’s more, though significant, the implications of this are not limited to her exhausted internal state, moral dismay, or feelings of ambiguity regarding her profession and its utility and goodness. If teachers are, in fact, living in the wake of moral injury, then it is likely this influences the students in their care.

Educational reformer Frances E. Fuller wrote that “teachers teach far more than just intellectual content in their total interactions with students. Students learn from teachers’ attitudes and ways of responding which comprise part of their ability to cope, but which teachers may not be conscious of teaching…” Not only are teachers struggling with the intense pressure of their call in conflict with structural limitations, but their own uneasiness likely affects students as well. When teachers themselves have come to question participation in the educational system, what does that communicate — even if unintentionally — to students?

The issue is not merely that sometimes it is hard to be ethical in a world that is complex and multifaceted. That reality is true for all people and professions. People in the teaching profession enter a particularly challenging context because their job is often bound up in their sense of calling. For teachers, professional educational challenges are often personal spiritual ones as well. The problem at hand is far larger than an individual’s failing: “where just action is both obligatory and impossible… educators suffer moral injury: the trauma of perpetrating significant moral wrong against others despite one’s wholehearted desire and responsibility to do otherwise.”

The “ought” of educational opportunity for all (justice) conflicts with the “is” of local financial restraints, federal educational policy mandates, and the realities of the teaching profession being both vocation and occupation.

Teachers want the best educational experience possible for their students but sometimes that is not viable. They want justice but are up against systems and structures that are larger than they are and which may well be resistant to change. If, following Reyes, vocation is that which grips us and inspires us to wake up and make a difference, to order our lives so that we might

38 Yarbrough, “Georgia Teachers Frustrated.”
41 It should also be noted that the dynamics of intersectionality and overlapping oppressions should not be forgotten in this context either. For example, a recent educational flare up occurred in Atlanta with educator Patrice Brown, whose job was placed at risk as a result of her attractive physical appearance being deemed “inappropriate” for school settings. Many have suggested that this issue only is an issue as a function of racism and sexism. See, for example: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/this-sexy-teacher-isnt-inappropriate---you-are/
flourish and, in turn, call others into a greater flourishing of life, then to stymie that call does moral injury. In US public schools teachers often face this reality and we do ourselves no favors by ignoring that fact.

**Implications and Next Steps**

At least two areas of response seem evident. Firstly, there are concrete implications that follow from accepting that MI is present in the teaching profession. Acknowledging MI could influence education at the school level as well as in teacher training programs and educational policy. Secondly — and speaking more theoretically — this topic lends credence to the legitimacy of theological and religious reflection on the role and function of public schooling in the US. Though the US does maintain a strict separation of Church and State for confessional religion, the paucity of scholarship regarding academic exploration of spiritualities and theologies of education is marked.

As for the teaching side of things, some work has begun. For example, the utility of MI literature for education is beginning to be explored by Lauren Porosoff of The Teaching Tolerance initiative at The Southern Poverty Law Center. Porosoff has done some initial exploration of the power and transformative healing that can emerge when school dynamics can be revealed as moral injury, developing an instrument to be used in classrooms with teachers to help them think through the ways in which they may be under strain that they have not yet come to recognize consciously. Academically, ethicist Meira Levinson has begun to reference the MI literature in her work on educational injustice. She writes,

Educators deserve resources to learn how to eliminate moral injury where possible (e.g. by learning techniques from expert educators that eliminate apparently intractable trade-offs and hence actually enable them to meet the demands of justice). They should be supported in their attempts to strive for justice, and enabled as much as possible to achieve it via education-specific and more general social and economic reforms. But since moral injury is to some extent inevitable, at least under the non-ideal conditions that afflict schools and societies worldwide, educators equally deserve resources to learn how to grapple with (even if not fully meet) the demands of enacting justice in ethically complex and challenging circumstances.

The work of both Porosoff and Levinson points to the kind of efforts needed to more fully engage the topic in such a way as to support actual pedagogical change and engender transformation. They are providing “a calling to new life” in our educational systems. Yet while I fully support and want to promote their work I find it insufficient. To be clear, nothing more can be reasonably expected from either Porosoff or Levinson: they are doing exactly the kind of work that a curriculum consultant and an educational ethicist should do. But as a theologian I cannot help but look to this work and see an area for theory and theological reflection that has great potential and relevance but little extant literature.

In 1984 religious educator John Hull called for the development of a “theology of education.” His vision was not a theology of education in the polemic sense of advocating for religiously confessional content in the curriculum, prayer in school, or the teaching of intelligent design, etc., but an inquiry into (1) how particular practices within public education may have an effect on the psycho-spiritual development of youth, and (2) why people of faith may have an investment in addressing current educational practices in public schooling. More than three decades later there have been less than a half dozen major attempts at anything like this, and some of them lean very heavily towards a polemic of (re)Christianizing the public sphere.

Given the continued absence of “theology of education” literature in general and what I believe is the increasing relevance of MI scholarship for education in particular, the time seems ripe for additional work in this area. Such a project seems a good fit for what Elaine Graham and her colleagues call “theology-in-action,” a public theology that reflects on the ways in which religion can interrogate questions of economics, politics, law, and justice, doing so from a theological perspective, especially as done with the intent to critique and offer constructive recommendations. Educational reform can be informed and inspired by spiritual and theological reflection without inappropriately dipping into confessional proselytizing.

If we accept Paulo Freire’s claims that education is a political and moral practice — I do wholeheartedly — the situation of MI in schools prompts several kinds of questions: What is the spiritual and moral impact of enforcing educative practices even when the teachers enforcing them feel conflicted about their merit? Ought the spiritual or religious convictions of people of faith inform their thoughts on pedagogy? What is the relationship between systemic oppressions in the broader culture and MI in schools? In what ways do these questions provide insight into a means to more fully engender a call to new life? The time is ripe for exploring these issues and the ways in which theology might contribute to constructive visions of education with a view toward an increase of human flourishing, toward that deep connection between student, teacher, and subject that is the hallmark not only of call, but of faithful response as well.

45 E.g. Mary Elizabeth Moore’s *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method*; Francis & Thatcher’s *Christian Perspectives for Education: A Reader in the Theology of Education*; Davies’ *A Christian Theology of Education*; Hodgson’s *God’s Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education*; Webb’s *Taking Religion to School: Christian Theology and Secular Education*.
46 Graham, et al., 2005.
47 E.g. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 
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