How do I choose?
Teachers make sense of their pedagogical responsibility

Teachers make numerous decisions daily. Many relate to the success of lessons, the opportunities for their students to learn, and the development of their classroom environment. Others are concerned with the purpose of education and the future that they are preparing their students for. In addition to their own motivations and aspirations, demands on teachers come from a variety of stakeholders including students, parents, administrators and policymakers. Teachers rarely have the opportunity to discuss their pedagogical responsibility, so how do they deal with these sometimes competing demands?

Doctoral candidates Grace A. Chen and Samantha A. Marshall, and Dr Ilana S. Horn, Professor of Mathematics Education, all from the Department of Teaching and Learning at Vanderbilt University Peabody College, are investigating how teachers make sense of their pedagogical responsibility. During the course of their research, they record a conversation among teachers triggered by the question for what? they teach mathematics when, outside of the classroom, their students struggle with issues such as poverty and violence.

The subsequent discourse analysis reveals the need to afford teachers opportunities to collaboratively make sense of their pedagogical responsibilities.

The researchers selected a social and situated approach to their study in order to explore pedagogical reasoning and pedagogical responsibility. Their rationale is that teachers’ thoughts and conversations about their actions and obligations are shaped by external influences, such as what they are told to do and what they observe other teachers doing. A trawl of teacher learning literature revealed that teachers’ storytelling offers a window to their pedagogical reasoning and can reveal the teachers’ assumptions and aspirations concerning their teaching practice, particularly their pedagogical responsibility.

This research focuses on teachers’ pedagogical reasoning in relation to their pedagogical responsibility, i.e. the teachers’ sense of their obligations and includes their moral, ethical, institutional, legal, instructional, and situational concerns. Given the significance of teachers’ sense of pedagogical responsibility, the research team highlights that teachers rarely get the chance to reflect and discuss their pedagogical responsibilities. This may be because teacher professional development usually centres on skills and strategies as opposed to the morals and ethics of teaching. Furthermore, pedagogical responsibility is personal and complex and connections between pedagogical reasoning and pedagogical responsibilities can be unclear.

**STUDY PARTICIPANTS**
This particular research formed part of a four-year ethnographic study of secondary mathematics teacher learning. The study was carried out in a large urban district in partnership with a professional development organisation (PDO). Around 80 teachers were selected for renewable five-year fellowships with the PDO. The teachers experience ranged from 1 to over 30 years of teaching. The programme involved participating in a full day professional development session, focused on teaching mathematics, each month during the school year. Participants also attend regional and national conferences together and a strong sense of community exists within the group. The teachers were passionate about their teaching and familiar with both collaborative learning and reflecting on their teaching practice. Educators outside of the PDO viewed the participants as ‘teacher leaders’.

**DATA COLLECTION**
The researchers employed a variety of data collection techniques, including acting as participant-observers in the professional development sessions each month. In addition to audio recordings of the sessions, the researchers took detailed fieldnotes, chronicling who was speaking, what they said and noting the emotional reactions. They also used notes, interview transcripts and artefacts from the larger study.

**FOCAL CONVERSATION**
During the morning of the final PDO meeting of the school year, the tone was both festive and sentimental as the group shared what they had learned and celebrated the graduation of those teachers who had completed their five year fellowships with the PDO and welcomed incoming teachers. In the closing session that afternoon, they watched a documentary film selected by the PDO leader, who had found it ‘interesting’ and thought that it would be an inspirational finale. She later told the researchers that she ‘didn’t expect it to hit as hard as it did’. The Bad Kids, filmed at an alternative high school, regarded as a ‘last chance’ school, focuses on the challenges faced by four students and the principal. The atmosphere in the room changed dramatically during the viewing, with some participants becoming upset and tearful. Afterwards, the PDO leader invited teachers to talk to each other, in order to process the viewing experience.

Then she asked if anyone wanted to ask a question. No one offered to, so she shared some hopeful updates on what happened to the students since the documentary was filmed.

**FOR WHAT?**
Some of the teachers offered their thoughts to the group. One teacher described a scene from the film where one of the students slept during a lesson. Emotionally, she continued:

> “And all I can think about is, ‘For what?’ All I can think about is tons of my students in the area. I had three deaths this year. … it hurts to know that all I cared about was Algebra 1 and they...”
I’m just wondering for myself, how do I choose? What am I supposed to do?

As mathematics teachers’. They realised about their pedagogical responsibility ratified or rejected common narratives repeatedly introduced, negotiated, ‘existentially significant in that teachers minutes, the researchers found to be group that, although it only lasted 30 creating an opportunity for conceptual This comment was a critical moment, then at the end that means nothing, 'really' doing as teachers. This exposed nuances relating to both the possibilities and the limitations of socially situated pedagogical reasoning surrounding the teachers’ pedagogical responsibility throughout this critical event.

The researchers believe pedagogical responsibility is a driving force behind teaching. They suggest that affording teachers opportunities to process tragedy, express vulnerability, and collectively participate in pedagogical reasoning specifically concerning pedagogical responsibility could be a potent asset to teacher learning. This collaborative sensemaking of their pedagogical responsibility would enable teachers to move beyond the familiar ideas of teaching mathematics for love or life skills and enable them to reconnect with the moral rewards of teaching. Moreover, this supportive environment provides teachers with the opportunity to examine their vulnerability and explore how to respond to tragedy, as well as collectively investigating transformative possibilities for a more just public education.

The research team concludes that these findings have particular relevance to the COVID era, ‘as teachers grapple with what and how they are supposed to teach given not only the complex socio-political context but also the multitudes of grief that they and students are likely experiencing’.

ANALYSIS AND IMPACT

A discursive analysis was performed on the conversation where the teachers discussed what they felt that they were ‘really’ doing as teachers. This exposed nuances relating to both the possibilities and the limitations of socially situated pedagogical reasoning surrounding the teachers’ pedagogical responsibility throughout this critical event.

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The study explores the purpose of teaching mathematics the ‘why’ by exploring the pedagogical reasoning entrenched in pedagogical responsibility.

I choose? What am I supposed to do?

This comment was a critical moment, creating an opportunity for conceptual change. After a long pause, an emotional conversation took place amongst the group that, although it only lasted 30 minutes, the researchers found to be ‘existentially significant in that teachers repeatedly introduced, negotiated, ratified or rejected common narratives about their pedagogical responsibility as mathematics teachers’. They realised that the teacher’s comment and the conversation that ensued were a rich site for them to analyse the teachers’ understandings of pedagogical responsibility.

Challenged by the question ‘for what?’ they teach mathematics when, outside of the classroom, their students struggle with issues such as poverty and violence, the teachers reflected on how loving their students and teaching them life skills, more than teaching mathematics, made them ‘good teachers’. While some teachers’ contributions referred to ‘the socio-political realities of living and teaching in an unjust society’, the conversation centred on the comfortable and familiar notion that love and life skills made good teaching and good teachers.

References