

TEACH^R

What matters most: Students speak about faith formation at school

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Introduction

The establishment of an authentic faith in God by both staff and students is viewed as essential to the mission and purpose of Christian education (Knight, 2016).

This growth in faith is coined in different ways by various authors, including that of faith development (Jones, 2023), faith formation (Fussell, 2021) or that of faith engagement (Petrie et al., 2019).

Social contexts, such as schools, have long been recognised as playing a key role in instilling an interest in faith, providing links to the broader faith community that includes parents and the church (Emmanuel, 2012; Francis et al., 2014; Long, 2014). Several authors have suggested, however, that despite their potential, religious institutions have often struggled to effectively support young people in their faith formation, resulting in a lack of commitment as they transition to adulthood (Bailey et al., 2016; Emmanuel, 2012; Frye, 2014; Good & Willoughby, 2008). It is argued that there is a need for continued exploration of effective approaches to working with adolescents (Horan, 2017; Westerhoff, 2012).

This study examines students' perceptions in three faith-based secondary schools in New Zealand to identify those aspects of the Christian school experience that they identify as having the greatest impact on their faith formation.

Literature review

In the experience of many people, the concepts of spirituality, religion and faith mutually influence aspects of life without clear boundaries between the three (Gschwandtner, 2021). For example, one might be spiritual without being religious or could adhere to religious instruction without a link to spirituality or faith (Gschwandtner, 2021). Faith may also be viewed as an outcome of being religious or spiritual, as well as the reason for it (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020).

Therefore, defining faith can be challenging as it is a concept experienced at an individual level, often being viewed as personal and private (Eigen, 2018). For some, faith can mean a general religious attitude, while for others, a personal belief system that guides their actions in creating meaning (Newman, 2004). Within a religious context, however, theistic faith infers a belief in God, along with a practical commitment to actions that demonstrate this belief (Bishop & McKaughan). This will be the understanding assumed within this paper.

Faith Formation

The work of developmental stage theorists, such as Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg, has strongly influenced the idea that faith development occurs in sequential developmental phases (Jones, 2023). Various theorists have described these proposed stages of faith development, such as James Fowler (Fowler & Dell, 2006), John Westerhoff (Westerhoff, 1980), Larry Stephens (Stephens, 1996) and Bruce

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Powers (Powers, 2003). Despite some differences, all argue for a human developmental view when describing the growth in faith of an individual.

Critics of this approach to faith formation have highlighted that stage theories, such as that proposed by Fowler, can be unnecessarily complex, adhere too closely to a sequential structure, and lean too heavily on cognition (Jones, 2023). It has been noted, for example, that people do not develop in uniform ways and that it is not unusual for younger people to display maturity ahead of a given developmental stage, while older people can display a corresponding immaturity (Day, 2010). Others argue that “faith is understood as a human response to God’s grace and as a gift from God” (Coyle, 2011, p. 285) and as such, cannot be conceptualised as neatly fitting into predetermined stages.

While differences may exist in our approach to understanding faith formation, there is general agreement that the term itself refers to the process whereby an individual will “construct, negotiate, disassemble, and reconstruct throughout their lives as they seek to make sense of the world, their lives, their relationship with others, and God” (Radecke, 2007, p. 4).

Faith Formation at School

The ecological systems theory proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner describes human development as a reciprocal relationship occurring between a person and the multiple contexts around them (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Rudasill et al., 2018). In a school setting, for example, it is acknowledged that multiple layers contribute to the development of a child both from within and without, the school context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Even when limiting the discussion to the immediate school context, several variables impact student development in general, and faith formation, in particular. These include aspects such as student-teacher relationships, the curriculum, peer influence and that of student voice.

There is evidence for example that students respond more positively when the teacher demonstrates concern for them, connects relationally and empathises emotionally (Maney et al., 2017). Students who develop this interpersonal trust hold their teachers’ words and statements in higher regard, creating a reciprocal exchange between students and teachers (Rotter, 1971). This provides opportunities for teachers to serve as influential role models by displaying commitment and authenticity in their own spiritual walk.

A further factor to consider is a curriculum design that intentionally supports the growth of

faith (Wilkerson, 2022). Building faith parallel to a well-designed curriculum is considered essential for effective Christian education, whilst also acknowledging the importance of the ‘hidden’ (unwritten) curriculum (Christian & Kilgour, 2014). Learning contexts should encourage a thought-provoking environment where the teacher leads and facilitates age-appropriate dialogue (Haase, 2014) and where the development of critical thinking skills is recognised as an important part of this process (Bailey, 2012).

In addition to the importance of positive student-teacher relationships and that of a well-designed curriculum, is the impact that peer influence has on the faith formation of students. Peer influence is viewed as the process whereby people change to more closely resemble others with whom they associate, with the direction of change usually dictated by the most influential member (DeLay et al., 2022). While this can sometimes occur between two people (dyadic), it often happens within a larger and more complex social network (Adams et al., 2020). There is substantial evidence confirming the strong impact that peer influence has in shaping attitudes, both positive and negative, during adolescence (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

In addition, it is important to recognise the place that student voice makes within this context. Research suggests a strong correlation exists between student voice and engagement (Allen & Nichols, 2017; Fisher et al., 2017; Mitra, 2018) and that when students feel they have a genuine say in decision-making, school becomes more relevant to their lives (Quaglia & Corso, 2014).

Measuring faith formation

The task of measuring faith formation can be problematic, with some questioning if it is even appropriate or possible (Hoekstra, 2012). Aspects such as adequate definitions, the subjective nature of data, and research design have all been questioned (Moberg, 2010). Others, however, argue that despite imperfections, these instruments have the potential to expand our understanding and provide insights into processes and influences that deserve further attention (Moberg, 2010).

Typically, faith formation is assessed using social behaviour-style surveys, administered over time, with increased scores viewed as indicators of progress (for example: Hall & Edwards, 2002; Petrie et al., 2016; Styron, 2004). Survey methodology allows relatively large population samples to be collected quickly, with the potential to repeat in order to gauge change over time (Eichhorn, 2022). However, qualitative approaches that capture the lived experience of participants have become

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increasingly prominent (for example: Keefe, 2021), allowing for the student voice to be explored more deeply.

Methodology

This study took a phenomenological mixed methods approach (Martiny et al., 2021) to answer the following question: What aspects of the Christian school experience do students identify as having the strongest impact on their faith formation?

This methodological approach is useful when a phenomenon such as faith formation in schools is described, interpreted, and understood through the participants' lived experience (Suddick et al., 2020; Williams, 2021).

A Delphi process was applied, where a group of experts are selected to provide consensus and wisdom on an issue of interest (Barrios et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2019). It utilises multiple phases to establish a consensus opinion by allowing participants to reconsider and refine their responses, based on the collective data (Linstone & Turoff, 2011). The group of experts in this study consisted of students in their last two years of secondary school (Years 12 and 13), who were intentionally selected for having several years of lived experience within the school.

Data collection

Three faith-based secondary schools in New Zealand (NZ) were selected to explore student perceptions of faith formation. These schools are part of a state-integrated system within NZ, with two being in the North Island and one being in the South Island. Each school comprises considerable diversity in ethnicity and faith, including students who do not have a faith background. Initial contact was made with the principal of each school, with a 'point person' subsequently assigned to liaise with the head researcher, recruit student participants, distribute consent forms, and organise appropriate venues and times for student participation.

Phase One: Initial focus groups

The first data collection phase consisted of four face-to-face focus groups at each school. These twelve groups comprised six students and ran for 40-50 minutes. The point person at each school intentionally selected students to represent a diversity of ethnicity, gender and faith (e.g. Seventh-day Adventist, other faiths, non-faith). There was also an effort to ensure that selected students would be capable of communicating effectively, be open and respectful toward the opinions of others, and likely have relevant insights from their lived experiences at the school.

The focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured manner where the interviewer began with several stimulus questions while allowing for the improvisation of follow-up questions based on responses from the participants (Kallio et al., 2016). This provided the opportunity for students to raise themes beyond those anticipated or initiated by the interviewer (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Examples of the starter stimulus questions included:

- What are some things your school does that you believe are important in helping you grow your faith in God?
- What are some things in school to do with God or faith that you look forward to and enjoy being involved in?
- Are there things that take place at school that 'put you off' wanting to engage in a faith journey?
- What are some things your teachers do, in or outside the classroom, that demonstrate a faith in God?

Participants in the semi-structured focus groups were kept within their respective year levels, with the same researcher conducting all focus group sessions across the three schools. All responses were audio-recorded, transcribed and imported into NVivo for inductive analysis. Student responses were coded, using different colours to identify recurring themes, significant statements and relevant units of meaning (Azungah, 2018). Further colour codes were used to highlight anomaly areas and potential directions for further exploration. This coding facilitated the triangulation of concepts along with their sources, using a coding map generated within NVivo.

The frequency of code words and phrases used in relation to the resulting themes was then computed, enabling the calculation of a percentage across the focus groups. This then informed the development of questions to be asked in Phase Two of the Delphi process.

Phase Two: Follow-up focus groups

Phase Two occurred four weeks after the first data collection and involved follow-up focus groups at each of the three schools. These focus groups were conducted online for two schools, while those at the third were conducted face-to-face. The focus groups were predominantly comprised of the same students who participated in Phase One, with a total of 65 students participating across the 12 focus groups.

An online interaction tool was used to gather student responses to five questions established

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from emerging themes in Phase One. These questions, provided below, were used to promote further discussion and consensus.

- Thinking about those teachers you really connect with, what is it about them or what do they do that makes this positive connection? Rank in order of importance.
- In thinking about Week of Worship/Student Week of Prayer, what aspects have the biggest impact on your faith journey? Rank in order of importance.
- Considering the Bible classes you attend, which areas are most important to growing your faith? Pick five options most important to you.
- In the previous interview, it was revealed that service activities made a real difference to you. Select the five options that best explain why.
- In previous interviews, it was revealed that the opportunity to have Bible Studies separate from the usual Bible classes was important to you. Why? Rank in order of importance.

Responses were used to provide consensus among students regarding the most significant themes when considering aspects of school life that impact their faith journey.

Phase Three: Questionnaire

The themes consolidated during Phase Two were used to construct an online questionnaire comprising 32 questions, administered using SurveyMonkey to all Year 12 and 13 students at each school (n=145). The purpose of this final phase was to gain a greater understanding of how well they perceived their school delivered within

each of the identified themes.

For each question, students were asked to provide a linear numeric scale measurement score from one (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) with questions grouped into four main themes: 1) student-teacher relationships, 2) Week of Worship, 3) Bible classes, and 4) service outreach. In the analysis stage, measurement scores were recoded using the transform function within SPSS, to create five levels of response in place of the original ten.

The items from each of these four groups of questions were entered into SPSS and subjected to principal component analyses. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (Kaiser, 1974) value for each of the four analyses exceeded 0.6, with Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) attaining statistical significance. Each set of questions suggested a single-factor solution, except for Week of Worship which was subsequently split into the two scales of Week of Worship Programs and Week of Worship Involvement. These five scales all demonstrated good internal consistency, with the following Cronbach alpha for each: student-teacher relationships (.896), Week of Worship Programs (.915), Week of Worship Involvement (.829), Bible Classes (.864) and Service Outreach Programs (.889).

Findings

The aim of this study was to explore those aspects of the Christian school experience that students identify as having the strongest impact on their faith formation. The use of the Delphi method enabled students to examine themes and establish a consensus regarding the ones they would prioritise.

Results from Phase One identified five key themes: student-teacher relationships, Week of Worship programs, Bible classes, Bible studies,

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Table 1: Phase Percentage Outcomes

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews		
Themes	Phase One (72 Students) Percentage of recurring themes from analysis of focus groups	Phase Two (65 Students) Percentage of key themes
Student-teacher relationships	76%	89%
Week of Worship	73%	83%
Bible classes	62%	84%
Bible studies	73%	50%
Service outreach	67%	80%

and service-related opportunities. These five themes were brought back to students in Phase Two for further discussion. Table 1 illustrates the consensus gained through the first two data collection phases.

The theme of Bible studies, initially identified in Phase One, was less emphasised by students in Phase Two, leading to removing this category when progressing to the questionnaire in Phase Three. This was due to participants feeling that the main purpose of Bible studies was present within regular Bible classes.

What students said

The following section outlines some of the comments made by students to assist in better understanding their viewpoints within the established themes.

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1. Student Teacher Relationships

Students spoke genuinely about the significance of a positive connection with their teachers when developing faith. They connected most with teachers who actively demonstrated care for them in key areas of their lives, including spiritual, academic and social. One participant stated, “*Most teachers are really good, really professional, and asking about how we are mentally, and they pray over us, which is really nice*”. Others mentioned the value of the support that teachers were able to provide academically: “*I find teachers helpful when you are wanting to set goals that might be slightly different to what your school year is supposed to look like*”.

It was evident that students recognised and appreciated qualities in teachers that they deemed as vital to growing their faith. These centred around their perceptions of Christian values such as trustworthiness: “*When I've had a rough day, I know that I can talk to ..., who will keep it confidential and then will pray for me afterwards which is something really cool. There's that trust you have in ...*”. Another positive quality discussed by students was the aspect of relatability in connection with trusting teachers. Participants also highly valued understanding and kindness: “*They always listen and are just really open about everything ... and that shows a good person*”. Teacher approachability, humour, and strong content knowledge of the subject assured students that teachers understood the purpose of their role in Christian schools. Additionally, those teachers who shared lived experiences,

gave of their time and connected outside school hours were more likely to influence student decision-making. As stated by one participant, “*I feel like they're very present for you and that they care for you. And I feel like they're forgiving and understanding too the demeanour of teachers here is very different to the school I went to*”.

Students engaged in faith formation programs due to the encouragement and influence of their teachers: “*she really wanted us to feel that spiritual connection that night and it really resonated with us girls. Even girls who don't usually speak, they spoke that night and shared their testimonies, and I think that really impacted our faith*”. The opposite was true, also, with some students being less inclined to participate in faith programs if their teachers were ‘hypocritical’ and less supportive.

The theme of teachers role modelling faith to students was frequently alluded to and is seen as significant to the student-teacher experience. Here, the role modelling of faith set an example to students of ‘walking the talk’ and was important to their understanding of Christ-like behaviours. Participants viewed role modelling and living out Christian values as key to role modelling faith in a relevant way: “*When I see them at church, it shows that they themselves are doing what they say to do, they're walking the talk*”. Participants shared the importance of seeing teachers engage with them outside of school through sports and other activities: “*Seeing them (teachers) attend church at your local church, I feel like that is a big one ...*”.

2. Week of Worship Programs and Involvement

Several participants noted the Week of Worship programs as a highlight of the school year, offering opportunities for participation and impact on their faith. They particularly looked forward to the messages, testimonies, Praise and Worship, and other activities. One student emphasised the importance of story-sharing: “*For me personally, it (testimonies) does. Especially hearing your friends or your close teachers giving testimonies in front of everybody. I feel like that's quite moving to hear for me personally at least. And those stick, for me*”. Participants recognised this impact as short-lived unless the message shared was discussed beyond the Week of Worship hour, in classrooms and throughout the

following weeks and months, resulting in a deepening of its effect.

There were mixed reviews regarding the messages' relevance and impact on personal student faith. Participants were clear about their need to hear more relevant topics to their faith journey: *"Some of the sermons aren't relatable We want to hear things about our spiritual life. Things that will help us personally in our faith"*. Increased student participation or interest in Week of Worship would require a change in program style, who are provided opportunities to lead out, what is shared, whether chaplain input is flexible, and encouragement of senior student involvement. One participant reflected, *"... we should have more students maybe preach and show their perspective and their journey on life because many of the students sitting there will resonate with that rather than people that have already gone through their journey ... that's way more effective"*. Many participants recognised opportunities to engage in Week of Worship; however, taking up that opportunity depended on student self-esteem, peer influence, interest and general student buy-in.

A significant number of participants found more spiritual value in having discussions about faith-related topics in a smaller setting, such as retreats, camps or Bible studies, and recommended this as an option for more engaging faith development; however, some students with strong Christian foundations did not feel a necessity for this and were satisfied with Week of Worship.

3. Bible Classes

Participants connected most with the content of the assessments taught in Bible classes when teachers taught through discussion, debates and activities; however, deeper discussions about current ethical 'hot topics' and their connection to the Bible was an area of great interest: *"We have good conversations about assessments we're going to do, just sparks more dialogue, get a bit more knowledge and more of a reflection of God's character"*. Those who struggled to engage in discussions experienced benefits in listening to the opinions of others, which helped formulate their own belief systems. One individual commented:

It really is Christian living. It's not just reading the Bible and learning about how other

Christians did Christianity well. It's actually learning to apply it to ourselves, and the opportunity to have hard questions answered in a more accessible way than some people would because sometimes, people find it socially difficult . . . just because that's not how some people learn. Having more hands-on learning in Christian living, I find to be quite good.

Other observations made by participants included that not all students enjoyed Bible classes due to the comprehensive literacy assessment style and would prefer Bible classes not to be credit-based, as is currently the case within the NZ Education system. One participant's thoughts were, *"I guess out of high school you don't have to think about the assessment for Bible, so you're more free to just be free in Christ"*. Students from different religious denominations and backgrounds valued the safe space of a Bible classroom to share thoughts and opinions without judgment: *"... you just feel safe and I feel like it opens doors for great faith-related conversations, which I've had a lot of this year, which is great"*. Participants wished to continue seeing more of a practical application of Bible classes in their lives. When engaging in Bible class activities, students sought to answer these questions: 'How does this information and learning apply to my spiritual walk?' and 'In what ways is this relevant to me?' For many participants, the purpose of offering Bible classes in Christian schools was clear: *"A lot of the Bible assignments are made so that they're applicable to our lives. It's not just like, "Here's what happened in the Bible.... this is what happened." It's made so that we can reflect and make it applicable to ourselves."*

4. Service Outreach

Participants saw local and overseas service trips as significant to their faith development, such as *"It's like my faith is in action...like practical Bible"*, though they understood the financial and practical strains on their schools to further this aim. As a result, many participants with Christian backgrounds sought to engage with service projects in their own church communities: *"I think because with the ministry I attend out of school, we tend to do more service out of church, go outreach, go door-knocking, visit prison, stuff like that. I feel like it will help me*

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grow more”. Participants who had previously engaged in community service appreciated the significant impact of local outreach programs focused on supporting and helping people. Those who had not previously experienced the action of service were indifferent to the general concept and benefits of service trips: *“I feel like it brings the people that go on it together. It helps build stronger relationships within the class. You actually have to get to know people when you’re on the service trip. At school, you can kind of avoid people, but on a service trip you have to get to know each other”*. There is a need for considerably more service opportunities to be offered and promoted in schools, whether local or further afield. One participant shared at length saying, *“I wish the school was a bit more mission orientated Fundraise and actually follow through with it....even excursions where they might go and help with a soup kitchen or that sort of thing. I feel that would be more beneficial. Seeing the follow through of missions and that sort of thing helps you as well as others”*. Students who are actively involved in their churches may have service opportunities, however that should not be the sole avenue for intentional service. Participants also recognised the positive relationships with staff who initiated and willingly supported students in serving the community: *“I suggested (to a teacher) that one of our mission trips would be to go to Gisborne because that was a thing back in the day for students to go down to Gisborne and help out their community and spread the word of God.”*

Findings from phase three - questionnaire

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this final phase was to gain a greater understanding of how well the students perceived their school delivered within each of the identified themes. The wider group of senior students from the three schools were invited to participate (n=145), providing an opportunity for greater consensus. Table 2 illustrates a summary of results, including the mean and standard deviation for each of the five scales (with student responses rated out of a maximum of five).

In order to determine if there was a significant deviation in mean within the five scales, compared to that of the overall (combined) mean, one-sample T-Tests were carried out. This indicated that opportunities for Week of Worship involvement were rated lower by students compared to other areas (p=.005), while student perception of their Bible classes was rated higher (p=.003).

It is also important to note the larger standard deviation in regard to Week of Worship programs and Week of Worship involvement (SD= 1.07; 1.13 respectively), compared to that of other scales. The views of students in regard to student-teacher relationships, Bible classes and Service outreach are more homogenous than those related to Week of Worship (programs and involvement) suggesting they have a more diverse range of opinions within this area.

Discussion

The positive impact of the personal interest that teachers take in the lives of their students, while often taken for granted, should never be underestimated. Relationships where students perceive the teacher as being receptive, approachable and caring, contribute to a classroom

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Five Scales

		Student-teacher relationships	Week of Worship programs	Week of Worship involvement	Bible Classes	Service Outreach
N	Valid	145	145	145	145	143
	Missing	0	0	0	0	2
Mean (range 15)		3.70	3.60	3.44	3.87	3.83
Median (range 15)		3.78	3.75	3.33	4.00	3.86
Mode (range 15)		3.70	4.00	3.00	3.88	3.00
Std. Deviation		.79	1.07	1.13	.80	.89

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into those aspects of the Christian school experience that students identify as having the strongest impact on their faith formation. The Delphi method assisted in gaining consensus across the students, with participants valuing the opportunity to have their voice heard and to feel they were contributing to a greater understanding of this area.

It is acknowledged that further research must be undertaken to understand how these results replicate within other school contexts and between different age groups. For example, the views of those in younger cohorts will be valuable in contributing to our understanding of this area.

Core to the success of Christian education is the imperative to keep in view the purpose for which it exists. The primary aim of Christian schools “is to lead people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ” (Knight, 2016, p. 70). This should be the filter through which the merits of decisions are weighed, in their ability to either support or detract from this greater vision. **TEACH**

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“Core to the success of Christian education is the imperative to keep in view the purpose for which it exists.”

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