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What considerations are important for fostering the faith development of senior students?

A case study of two schools with campus churches

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> *It is generally accepted that Christian schools, in addition to offering quality education also aim to influence the development of each student's personal faith*

Abstract

Campus churches, situated on school grounds, are growing in number within Christian education systems in Australia. In this relationship, the school partners with the campus church in providing a community of faith. This case study investigated senior students' perceptions of the factors positively influencing their faith development at two K–12 Christian schools with campus churches. A review of the literature pointed to a strong connection between adolescent faith development and social context, but noted research gaps in the area of the school-church nexus. Data were gathered from senior students, school staff and campus church members, employing an emergent mixed-method approach, through the use of a questionnaire, focus group interviews and unstructured staff interviews. The data, when analysed, revealed that faith development for senior students is more likely to occur when six key factors are taken into consideration in the planning and implementation of faith-based activities and programs, namely: *Perceptions about spirituality, influence of the school's special character, relevant content, social context, emphasis on discipling through involvement, and positive relationships with school/church personnel*.

Introduction

Christian schools may be viewed as an extension of the Christian church. In fact, schools and affiliated churches increasingly share the same property. It is generally accepted that Christian schools, in addition to offering quality education, also aim to influence the development of each student's personal faith. This is evident in curricular and extra-curricular activities that Christian schools offer and in some instances, through their connection with campus churches. Christian schools work in partnership with 'the church' at large, acting as a support for the beliefs and lifestyle it espouses.

Not only are Christian schools increasingly connected with an affiliated church, but it is becoming commonplace that the intentional establishment of campus churches is specifically aimed at providing a spiritual home for the school's students, staff and families. These communities of faith are evident in a number of private school systems such as the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA), Catholic and Anglican as well as in Assemblies of God, Baptist and Parent Controlled Christian Schools, among others. There is a growing trend to intentionally use the existing church on campus or plant a new church community on the school campus in an effort to encourage the transition of un-churched students and their families into a Christian faith community.

What is unknown, however, is the effectiveness of this partnership, and to what extent this school-church nexus environment influences the attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of students in regards to their personal faith development and affiliation with the campus church community.

The study

Need and purpose

Little research has been conducted to examine the relationship between Christian schools and campus churches in general, and SDA schools and campus churches in particular. Presently, little is

known also about the dynamics of the relationship between schools with campus churches in regards to the transition of students and their families into the church community. Further, there appear to be difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of a school-church nexus as an outreach tool. On those accounts alone, the study may be regarded as valid and timely.

The study attempted to find out what factors influenced the faith development of senior students within the environment of a school-church nexus, with the intention that the research might contribute to addressing the lack of credible knowledge in this area and provide some practical guidance to educators and pastors.

The research questions

The focus question for this study was, "What are senior students' perceptions of the factors that positively influence their faith development within the environment of a school-church nexus?" In addition, the following subsidiary questions were utilised to guide the collection of data:

1. What are the senior students' perceptions of spirituality, and do they consider themselves to be spiritual?
2. What school-related factors are perceived by senior students to positively influence their personal relationship with God?
3. What proportion of senior students have an affiliation with the campus church, and what form does the affiliation take?
4. Within the case study schools, what factors are perceived by senior students and staff to impact senior students' attendance at campus church events?

Setting and participants

Two K–12 schools were chosen for this case study. Both had campus churches, although the campus church of School One (S1) was set up after the establishment of the school itself. In the case of School Two (S2), the campus church pre-dated the school's location on the same property. Both schools had a relatively low ratio of SDA students in relation to the total school population.

A total of 139 Year 11 and 12 students from S1 and S2 participated in the study; the students were a representative sample of students in the school system to which S1 and S2 belonged.

Literature Review

Adolescents as social beings

Human beings are fundamentally social creatures inherently influenced by the surrounding social environment in which they find themselves (Aronson, 1995; de Souza, 2009; Noller & Feeney, 2006). Adolescence, in particular, is a time when the social environment significantly impacts on behaviour and belief (Aronson, 1996; Fowler, 1981; Ozorak, 1989). The social environment of both churches and Christian schools plays a significant role in the development of belief and behaviour (Barrett, Pearson, Muller & Frank, 2007; Regnerus, Smith and Smith, 2004), but the impact of a school-church nexus on faith development has not been the focus of formal research efforts.

Spirituality, religiosity and faith

> ***Three terms are central to this study: spirituality, religiosity and faith***

Three terms are central to this study: Spirituality, religiosity and faith. Although spirituality is usually associated with religious belief, it is widely recognised that spirituality is somewhat distinct from religion or religiosity (Newberg and Newberg, 2006). Wakefield (1983) highlights a broadening of the term *spirituality* which (Kline, 2008, p. 166) maintains encompasses "the feelings, thoughts, experiences and behaviours that arise from a search for the sacred". From a Christian perspective, the term *spiritual* can mean, "the dynamic, holistic, maturing relationship between the individual believer and God, and between the individual believer and others" (Pettit, 2008).

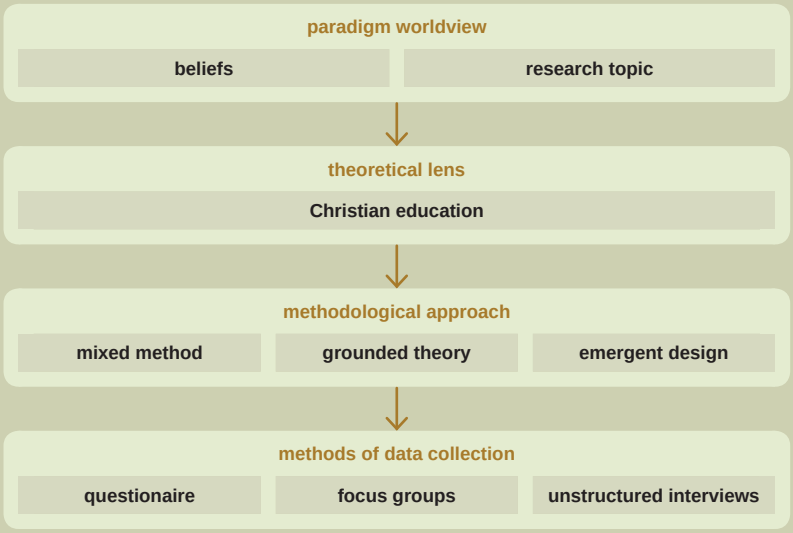
Religiosity is often contrasted with spirituality; the former being identified with structure, institutions, rituals and theology, while the latter is described as an individual phenomenon related to inner meaning and experience of transcendence (Tacey, 2006). De Souza (2009, p. 3) believes it is necessary to "identify spirituality as something distinct from religion while recognising the obvious links between the two".

The third term of significance is *faith*. Faith is the meaningful experience that helps us move beyond our everyday existence to make sense of the world (Fowler, 1981). Both Westerhoff (1976) and Smith (1979, as cited in Fowler, 1981, p. 9) perceive faith as a deeply personal and dynamic phenomenon, whereas religion is connected to traditions and viewed more as an *expression* of faith. Faith also involves the loyalty, values and concerns of an individual, and how they know and express these concerns (Evering Jr., Wilcox, Huffaker and Snelling Jr., 1998). The term *faith development*, adopted in this study, describes the development of a Christian faith by which an individual "sets one's heart upon" Jesus Christ (Smith, 1979, as cited in Fowler and Dell, 2006, p. 42).

Faith development and adolescence

Faith development from infancy to adulthood is influenced by a variety of factors, such as a person's upbringing, personality and temperament, social experiences, conscience development, parenting

Figure 1: Development of the research study



Adapted from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 39

> ***Faith development, awakening spirituality and even religiosity, rarely occur in isolation from the social context***

style in the family, religious exposure and life experiences (Habenicht and Burton, 2004). Faith development, awakening spirituality and even religiosity, rarely occur in isolation from the social context (Childs, 1992; Pettit, 2008). Relationships take on heightened importance and Aronson (1995, p. 28) notes "that the more faith an individual has in the expertise and trustworthiness of the other person, the greater the tendency to follow his lead and conform to his behaviour". Adolescence is also characterised by a search for and formation of personal identity, a key aspect of adolescent development (Fowler, 1981). The combination of relationships and social awareness that occurs within a community, (family, school, club, church), has the potential to influence faith development to some extent. The influence may be either positive or negative.

The literature reveals that the impact of schools functioning as faith communities is largely unknown. Wighting and Liu's (2009) study, however, found a clear correlation between religious commitment and a sense of community within the school setting. One notable exception to the lack of research on faith development within SDA schools comes from the Value Genesis study (Hughes, 1993; Gillespie, Donahue, Boyatt and Gane, 2004). Although this study does not specifically deal with the school/campus church nexus, it does make connections between SDA schools and Christian commitment among students. The study found a measure of positive correlation between students' Christian commitment and attendance at a SDA school (Hughes, 1993, p. 67).

School-church nexus

The influence of a campus church as a factor impacting adolescent faith development in the school setting is only at the level of a hypothesis. It has yet to be confirmed by valid and reliable research evidence.

SDA schools in Australia often function in conjunction with an already existing church. However, as previously noted, there has been a recent phenomenon where campus churches have been planted with the aim of providing a community of faith that includes un-churched students and their families (Lemke, 2010). The plan is to achieve this aim through intentional strategies and the team efforts of campus church leaders, school administrators, staff, and chaplains. According to Lemke (2010), several SDA schools in Australia are experiencing the benefit that an integrated campus church has on the faith development of students. There is scarce research, however, that differentiates between the faith development of adolescents in a Christian school *with* a campus church, compared to those in a Christian school *without* a campus church. Articles dealing with factors influencing the transition of students into the faith community of a campus church seem to be absent from the literature.

The research method

The research approach used in this study was an 'emergent mixed method design' (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011, p. 54), which is built on the framework of 'grounded theory' (Fraenkel and Warren, 2006; Yin, 2009) as the process of inquiry. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

All senior students in the participating schools were invited to complete the questionnaire. A total of 139 senior students responded. From this cohort of S1 and S2 students, focus groups were chosen that were representative of the total of participating students. In addition, unstructured interviews were conducted with three senior Bible teachers, two school chaplains, two principals, and two campus church pastors.

Data collected through the mixed method mode were analysed following a 'convergent parallel design'. This required that the data from both the *quantitative* and *qualitative* approaches be compared and related to inform final interpretation.

Results

Students' perceptions

Spirituality

In response to the first question in the questionnaire, "Do you feel that you are a spiritual person?" two-thirds of the sample population (68%) responded "yes". The students' perceptions of spirituality were discussed during the focus group interviews in response to focus group question one. The responses regarding what the students' perceived spirituality to be, ranged from 'being in the presence of God' to '[knowing] who you are'. When the students were asked if spirituality was the same as religiosity, the general consensus was 'no'.

The ideas associated with religion that emerged from the focus groups were: Rules, physical ritual, following strict guidelines, and attending church. Spirituality on the other hand, was associated with comments about belief, faith, relationship, and connection with a deity. One response, typical of several, said, "Religion is more like rules and stuff and spirituality is more like having faith, rather than rules". This was supported by the student who claimed, "I don't go to church, but I'm still spiritual".

School-related factors positively influencing students' relationship with God.

After coding the focus groups' responses, three school-related factors emerged as significant in positively influencing the students' relationship with God. Ranked by the participants in order of importance; these were:

1. Experiencing God through the daily culture of the school which included daily exposure to Christianity, the atmosphere or ethos of the school, daily prayer in the home-room, morning devotions and the availability of Christian resources such as Bibles. One student summed up the general opinion of the focus groups with the comment, "I think daily exposure [to Christianity] is pretty important because it covers everything", while another shared, "What changed my life was morning devotions".
2. Experiencing God through aspects of the school program such as the regular Biblical Studies / Religion classes, voluntary Bible studies, and class camps.
3. Experiencing God through social connections with peers, friendship groups, teachers, the school chaplain and the campus church pastor. For the majority of students, social connection was a positive factor with a focus on "positive examples from teachers" and the insights of friends. An exception was noted in one of the focus groups and highlighted that relationships also have the potential to *negatively* impact on other students' relationship with God.

Students' affiliation with the campus church

The question, "Which religion do you belong to?" was an optional question for students to answer. The results showed that about one third of the students chose not to answer this question. Of those who answered the question, 34% were affiliated with Protestant Christianity, 14% were Catholic or Orthodox, 8% belonged to a non-Christian religion, and 10% indicated they were Seventh-day Adventist. The results indicated that at least 58% of the sample population align themselves with Christianity. Of the total survey population, 7% attend the campus church on Saturday mornings. Almost 70% have never attended the campus church on Saturday mornings, while another 23% indicated they rarely or sometimes attended the campus church service. Overall, 78% of the sample population has been associated at least once with the campus church in some form through the involvement of the school in the church program.

When asked, "Would you be interested in visiting the campus church?" the combined S1 and S2 responses showed, 63% *were not interested* in visiting the campus church, 27% *were interested*, and 10% *did not give a response*. Just over 50% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they had been invited by someone to attend the campus

> ***Overall, 78% of the sample population has been associated at least once with the campus church in some form through the involvement of the school in the church program***

church at some point during the time they had attended the school, while 40% indicated that they had not been invited, and 8% did not respond.

Over half of the respondents (58%) indicated that they knew the campus church pastor. The variables to the response of this question included how long the students had attended the school, and how long the current campus church pastor had been at the church.

> ***"The most reported impacts on students' attendance at campus church-related programs/activities were, connecting socially, and being involved"***

Students' and staff's perceptions

Factors likely to impact on students' attendance at campus church events

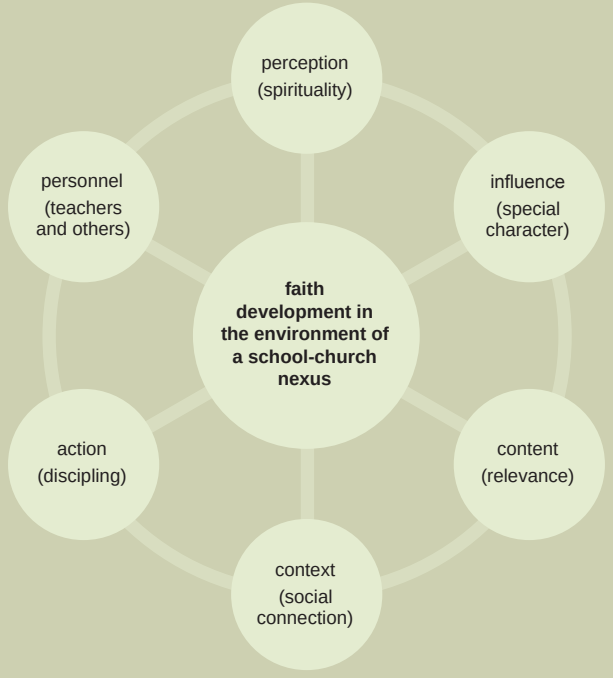
In focus groups, students were asked to identify factors currently impacting their attendance at the campus church, and in a subsequent question, they were asked to identify factors that *would* impact their attendance if they were in place.

The responses of the four focus groups' fitted into two categories. The most reported impacts on students' attendance at campus church-related programs/activities were, connecting socially, and being involved. Across all focus groups, *social connection* and *involvement* were perceived as equally important (11 responses for each category). *Personal interest* was an additional minor factor that was also identified by one focus group.

Examples given of *connecting socially* were, friends and family who were also attending, school staff attendance, encouragement, and a positive atmosphere. Correspondingly, examples provided for *involvement* were, compulsory participation in events, where and when the school was involved; voluntary involvement in programs or worship; special occasions; and what was summed up as, involvement in the whole experience of being there.

When asked, "What factors *would influence your decision* to attend activities at the campus church?" the four focus groups' responses fell into two categories: *Social connection* and perceived *relevance to students' lives*. Social connection included friends and family attending ("the people who go there"), food, acceptance, advertising and special events such as combined school worship programs. Perceived *relevance* covered the factors of relevant youth programs ("like coping with…teenage pregnancy, sex…"), guest speakers ("aimed at us"), music, and convenient times.

Figure 2: Key considerations for strengthening the impact of a school-church nexus on the faith development of students



Themes

Three significant themes emerged 'across' all the focus groups' responses. These were:

1. Social interaction is a highly significant factor for teenagers' willingness to participate in spiritual events.
2. Involvement did not increase their spirituality, but the data indicated that it increases their attendance at spiritual events that are geared towards spiritual growth and faith development.
3. Relevance: voluntary involvement depends on the perceived relevance of the activities.

The unstructured staff interviews provided data that revealed the staff perceptions of the school-church relationship, and the factors staff members believed to be impacting students' attendance at the campus church. Most staff indicated that the occurrence of students transitioning into the campus church community was rare, however, evidence of individual senior students who had made this transition were mentioned. Furthermore, staff members perceived social factors as significant to the transition of students into the campus church community, which aligned with the results from the focus group interviews.

Discussion

Key considerations

Schools with campus churches are well situated to help students' transition into a church community. The results of this study, however, demonstrate that the mere presence of a campus church does not guarantee or necessarily facilitate this transition. The research findings did not explicitly outline factors contributing to faith development of students, but gave an overall picture of six key considerations for strengthening the impact of a school-church nexus on the faith development of students. Six key considerations were synthesised from the subsidiary question results. The model in Figure 2, illustrates the six key considerations, which are described in greater detail below.

1. Perception (spirituality)
This is the mindset that senior students have in relation to the area of spirituality and religiosity. Senior students perceive spirituality as more authentic and meaningful than religion. Students are more likely to be interested in particular programs or events that present Christianity from a personal perspective rather than a church organisational perspective.

2. Influence (special character)
The *special character* of a school, as evidenced in its daily culture and ethos, emerged as the strongest factor, both in emphasis and frequency, for helping students develop a relationship with God. School culture is also strongly connected to teaching staff who are modelling Christianity every day to students through aspects such as daily prayers and morning devotions, that according to the students, positively impacts their own personal relationship with God. This indicates the importance of incorporating the *special character* of the school in its curricula, plans, programs and activities by teaching personnel committed to the Christian faith of the school.

3. Content (relevance)
Students indicated their desire for programs to be relevant to the contemporary culture in which they live and for programs to deal with issues they are facing. This has implications for the content, style and delivery of any progam in either the school or church arena. Whether it is biblical, relational or lifestyle-focused, *relevance to students* emerged as a key consideration.

4. Context (social connection)
The results of this research indicate that faith development for adolescents is best facilitated in a social context. Therefore, spiritual events and programs with a strong social component in terms of *who* is involved, *what* is involved, and *where* events are held are more likely to appeal to senior students. This finding was strongly supported by the literature.

5. Action (discipling)
Involvement was perceived as a significant factor in attending campus church activities. Involvement and participation are also crucial to the process of discipling in which students make an intentional decision to accept Jesus as their Saviour and Lord of their lives. Focus group comments indicated that the key action of schools/churches seeking to build the faith of senior students should be that of discipleship, where students are given opportunity to actively participate in faith building activities such as service projects, small group and individual Bible study groups, prayer support groups, and chapel programs with opportunities for leadership by students; where appropriate.

6. Key personnel (teachers and others)
A range of significant personnel was identified in this research as contributing to the faith development of students. Teachers emerged at the top of the list, followed by peers, families, and then church and school pastoral care staff. The implication is that teachers by the very nature of their position are 'significant others' to their students. All relationships are important to students; however the influence of teachers is more direct, frequent and consistent than any other key personnel.

Christian Schools, therefore, will benefit from being staffed with committed, authentic Christians who have a passion for God and their students, who can model Christian living in their relationships, and integrate Christian principles into their teaching.

The results suggest that each of the six key considerations, if implemented, could provide an environment within a school-church nexus that would be conducive to the faith development of students. The focus groups responses revealed that in some instances this was happening in the case study schools, but the responses also pointed to a degree of disconnect between the schools and the campus churches with a tendency for their operations to be mutually exclusive. Based on this study, it can be posited that in order to achieve maximum effectiveness in helping students with their faith development, each school and campus church should develop a symbiotic relationship, or at the very least, some common goals. Table 1 provides a summary of the six key considerations and their implications for the school-church nexus, as discussed above.

> ***"The special character of a school, as evidenced in its daily culture and ethos, emerged as the strongest factor, both in emphasis and frequency, for helping students develop a relationship with God"***

Table 1: A descriptive summary: Key considerations for strengthening the impact of a school-church nexus on the faith development of students

Key consideration	Description	Implications for schools and campus churches
Perception	Spiritual not religious	Take this particular mindset into consideration when planning events and programs
Influence	Special character	Strengthen the *special character* of the school culture
Content	Relevance	Consider the culture of students in the planning and implementation of programs
Context	Social connection	Be aware that adolescent faith development happens within a social context
Action	Discipling	Mentor students through involvement and leadership in both school and campus church activities
Personnel	Teachers and others	Build strong relationships that are authentic and safe

> ***Intentionally strengthened special character includes having committed staff members who authentically model their faith in their everyday lives and through their teaching***

One notable omission in the results is any reference to the work of the Holy Spirit in changing the lives of the students. Is not known whether this is due to the nature of the data collection process, the mind frame of the student sample, or other reasons. Thus, it could be argued that a seventh key consideration, *prayer for guidance and openness to God's voice*, be included in the model. This would recognise that planning can provide an optimum environment for faith development, but it is the Holy Spirit who makes changes in the hearts of individuals.

Conclusion and recommendations

Each school is unique, so caution should be used when applying the results of this research, although the six key considerations are sufficiently generic to apply to most schools in the Christian schools sector. With this in mind, three recommendations emerge from this study:

1. Schools and associated campus churches that are intentional about the faith development of students—particularly in the senior Years—should note the six key considerations emerging from this study (perceptions, context, personnel, influence, action and content) when planning and implementing spiritual programs, projects and other related activities.
2. Where a campus church exists, school and campus church leaders should engage in substantive communication about the relationship between the two identities and how they can be best merged into one community of faith. Discussions should be held to articulate the purpose of the relationship between the church and the school.
3. Faith-based schools should intentionally strengthen the *special character* of their school environment. This includes having committed staff members who authentically model their faith in their everyday lives and through their teaching.

This study shows that while a school-church nexus can provide an environment conducive to adolescent faith development, it was not strikingly evident in the two case study schools. What did emerge were six key considerations that may facilitate faith development in senior students when factored into the planning and implementation of spiritual programs and activities. These six key considerations are perceptions about spirituality, influence of the school's *special character*, relevant content, social context, involvement in discipling, and positive relationships with school and church personnel. TEACH

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