

Chapter Two

Revealing Jesus through teacher relationships: How educators' relationships impact the ethos of the learning environment

Beverly J Christian

Avondale University College

Abstract

This chapter draws on data from original qualitative research to explore the nature of the relationships that may contribute to an educational learning environment with a Christian ethos. The literature revealed the importance of positive relationships on student achievement, socioemotional wellbeing and connection, but also highlighted a scarcity of research that explored the nature of educators' relationships and how they shape perceptions of the learning environment. Using the Gospel of John as an exemplar of Jesus' relationships, this investigation used a narrative sensemaking approach to identify six types of relationships that teachers and administrators value as influencing their own capacity to understand and practise Christian education.

Introduction

Relationships are the glue of life, holding people together. At their best, they operate as a catalyst for wellbeing. At their worst, they act as dynamite, blowing people apart and destroying lives. Given the

fact that humans crave relationships, it is little wonder that a vast body of research exists on the topic (Brittany, 2012; Healey, 2012; Menon, Pendakur & Perali, 2015; Noller & Karantzas, 2012; Senker, 2013). Farrell (2002) says of relationships:

There is no predictability to relationships, no database to allow any kind of rational forecast; we throw our balls up in the air and they come down in a totally random manner. Two beautiful and gentle people can produce plutonium, two obnoxious and dysfunctional people can sing as sweetly as a linnet (p. 179).

In this quote, Farrell is talking about relationships that have been deliberately chosen between two adults. However, not all relationships begin on such an equal footing. Sometimes individuals are placed in work circumstances, for example, where they need to develop relationships in order to achieve a common goal. Parents and children enjoy relationships of another kind, which is different again to relationships between teachers and students. Relationships may be healthy, or they may be toxic, but whichever, they influence the people who are in them for better or for worse.

Despite the historical widespread research interest in relationships in general, it has taken longer for researchers to explore the relationships that exist in school settings. Traditionally, the role of the teacher was an autocratic role, although how this played out was determined by individual teachers. Based on fear, and assisted by a range of punishments, students were often forced to 'respect' their teachers. Changing educational paradigms in the last half century began to modify the relationship between teachers and children, and now there is a growing body of literature that examines the role of teacher-student relationships in the learning environment (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013), with Hendry (2009) positioning relationships at the foundation of learning. Research affirms that positive teacher-student relationships have the capacity to increase academic achievement (Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo & Li, 2010), develop social-emotional competency (Rucinski, Brown & Downer, 2018), and create connections within the learning environment that enhance a sense of belonging (Grace, Hodge & McMahon, 2017; Roffey, 2011). The latter often occurs as a result of the mentoring role that develops alongside relationships (Chan, Rhodes, Howard, Lowe, Schwartz, & Herrera, 2012).

Although the impact of the teacher-student relationship is strongly represented in the literature, the research dealing specifically with how teachers, and subsequently the learning environment, are impacted by other teacher relationships is less visible. One area where the impact of teacher relationships does appear is in literature related to school climate (Pogodzinski, 2015; Price, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Drexler (2007) also deals with relationships in a whole school context with a focus on the importance of relationships between colleagues, and Roffey (2011) posits that if relationships are ‘visible, warm, supportive and full of good humour, this leads to higher levels of social capital and relational trust’ (p. 112).

Rogers (2002) supports the importance of positive relationships in building collegial support in a school. He has identified three domains of support: moral, professional and structural, all of which rely on relationships to varying degrees. Moral support is based on reciprocity, a flow of ideas and support that goes between colleagues in a non-judgemental, constructive manner. It involves empathy, but not ownership of colleagues’ challenges, and allows for differences of opinion and practice without judgement. Moral support occurs best in a climate of shared trust (Roffey, 2011).

Professional support is more intentionally linked to the teaching role and revolves around the establishment of professional learning communities. Professional learning communities are based on the work that teachers do. They focus on improvement and on meeting learning outcomes. They function in a shared space where they collaborate by ‘working together towards a common understanding of concepts and practices’ (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007, p. 3).

Structural support relates not only to how teachers are supported in their work, but to how these support structures are communicated to staff (Roffey, 2011), highlighting the importance of establishing sound relationships between school principals and staff. (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Price, 2015). Another well-documented area where teacher-teacher relationships are explored in literature is in the context of mentoring. Wright (2010) devotes a whole book to developing outstanding teachers through mentoring, while others report on the efficacy of formal mentoring programs (Shwartz & Dori, 2016). In the field of Christian education, mentoring has been a matter

of discussion for some time. Edlin (2014) points out that relationships are central to Christian education, not only between humanity and divinity, but also through ‘the possibility of restored relationships between people based on the finished work of Jesus Christ’ (p. 134).

Outside of professional relationships and mentoring, there appears to be limited research that explores the nature of educators’ relationships, and whether these relationships have a flow-on effect to the learning environment. Given this gap in the literature, this chapter addresses the relationships of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel of John. It then draws on original data in which Christian educators self-identified the types of relationships they experienced in their careers, and how these relationships influenced their perceptions of Christian education and their roles as Christian educators. Finally, it juxtaposes Jesus’ relationships with relationships identified by eight Christian educators to extrapolate common themes and possible recommendations for Christian education leaders.

Jesus and relationships in the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John offers some rich insights into the way Jesus related to people around Him. Knight (2016) posits that ‘part of the reason for the success of Christ’s ministry was that He really cared’ (p. 65). He affirms this idea with the statement, ‘At the very heart of Christ’s teaching ministry was the caring relationship’ (p. 66). This idea comes from an esteemed author on Christian education, who wrote that Jesus ‘showed consistency without obstinacy, benevolence without weakness, tenderness and sympathy without sentimentalism. He was highly social, yet He possessed a reserve that discouraged any familiarity. His temperance never led to bigotry or austerity. He was not conformed to the world, yet He was attentive to the wants of the least among men’ (White, 1943, p. 262).

Jesus entered this world, born of an earthly mother and a heavenly Father. What a poignant moment that must have been as the Eternal God watched this tiny infant struggle to transition to humanity. What awe must have silenced heaven as the Creator became the created One. This moment in time heralded a changed, but not severed, relationship between God the Father and God the Son. John affirms the status of The Word as God in Chapter 1, and in John 5:19–29, Jesus affirms this status of oneness with God the Father. This becomes a recurring

theme with additional discourses on this topic found throughout John 8, in John 10:30, and in John 12:27–50. This relationship with the Father sustained Jesus through the challenges of His earthly ministry. Within the context of Christian education, Wilhoit and Rozema (2014, p. 245) make the salient point that ‘the spiritual maturity of the teacher is not incidental to the teaching-learning process. Teachers can only effectively teach what they deeply understand and have grasped from experience’.

We do not know very much about Jesus’ earthly family or His relationship with His parents and siblings, and the Gospel of John adds little knowledge to this area, but we do know that Jesus cherished His relationship with His mother enough to entrust her to the care of John in the final moments of His life (John 19:26). We can only surmise what impact the relationship between mother and son had on Jesus’ ministry, although White (1940) attributes Jesus’ understanding of His purpose and work to His mother’s instruction. We also learn from John that Jesus had brothers (John 2:12), and read in John 7:3–5 that initially ‘they have no sense of His mission’ (Wright, 2002, p. 93), and were perplexed by His lack of self-aggrandisement (White, 1940), although we can only conjecture what impact this had on Him personally.

Apart from His relationship with His Father, the best examples of relationships we see in the Gospel of John are taken from Jesus’ interactions with His disciples. Drawn from diverse backgrounds, these twelve men spent extended time with Jesus Christ over the three years of His ministry, observing Him, being mentored by Him, learning about the Kingdom of Heaven and how He related to people. Early in John’s gospel, the disciples are initiated into following Jesus (John 1:35–51). Having cast their lot with this gentle revolutionary, the disciples begin to observe by word and action how the kingdom of God operates in people’s lives. Jesus performs His first miracle at a wedding (John 2:1–12), a symbolic celebration of a new relationship, and at this occasion, the disciples experience a growing sense that Jesus may be the Messiah (John 2:11).

John gives us several examples of how Jesus builds relationships with His disciples. He spends time with them, discussing matters of importance, (John 8, 14, 16). He mentors through challenging their preconceived ideas about who He is (John 6). He attends to them as

a servant would (John 13). John records two occasions in Jesus' later ministry where He promises to leave His presence with them, in the form of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–20; John 16:8–15), confirming the strong bond He has formed with this mixed bunch of Galileans. This relationship continues after His death and resurrection when He makes breakfast for them on the beach; an act of hospitality that nurtures not only their hearts but caters to their physical needs (John 21:1–14).

Jesus had many other followers beside the regular twelve. Among these were Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. John records that 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus' (John 11:5), and the narrative of His interactions after the death of Lazarus demonstrate His compassion for the sisters, going further than mere comfort to restoration of the family.

Everywhere Jesus encountered people, He built relationships. His instant rapport with individuals from all walks of life created relationships wherever He went. Although transient in nature, these encounters left a lasting impression and changed the directions of people's lives. Two characters who experienced change are Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well, as portrayed in John's gospel. Nicodemus (John 2:1–12) is drawn to Jesus, but not willing to openly be seen with Him. Instead, he organises a clandestine meeting so he can engage in dialogue. The situation appears somewhat ridiculous; a Galilean who associates with fishermen and tax collectors is sought out by an educated and religious leader. Jesus listens and then, through astute questions, challenges Nicodemus's perceptions of what it means to be born again. At the end of this encounter, Nicodemus has a different perspective. Allen (2011) juxtaposes this transient relationship against the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42), demonstrating the impartiality of Jesus in regard to social standing, wealth or position. Despite this story being open to a variety of interpretations, Gench (2007) points out that Jesus engages the woman at the well in 'a genuine and extended conversation' (p. 30), a precursor to building a relationship, and further posits that this woman 'is the most effective evangelist in this whole Gospel, hence a model for Christian life' (p. 38).

In both these narratives, we observe relationships which change perceptions, and ultimately, even the direction of people's lives. With evidence that relationships have the power to transform, this chapter

now explores how educators perceive the potential of relationships to shape the learning environment of a school.

Methodology

This research was part of a larger qualitative, grounded theory case study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Boyatzis, 1998) that encompassed a bricolage of case study (Yin, 2014), narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

The overarching question informing the study was:

How have the lived experiences of eight educators shaped their perceptions of the philosophy, purpose and practice of Christian education?

From this focus question, a subsequent question framed the investigation:

What shaping influences do eight educators with diverse lived experiences hold in common?

This chapter reports on one of the thematic shaping influences that emerged from the research. The participants were eight educators in one Christian education school system. Participation in this cross-sectional study was based on purposeful sampling to meet the role criteria for the study. Four of the educators were current classroom teachers (chosen by their school principal), and the remaining four were administrators, including a school council chairperson. Participants, hereafter referred to as educators, were coded E1–6 based on their years of experience within Christian education.

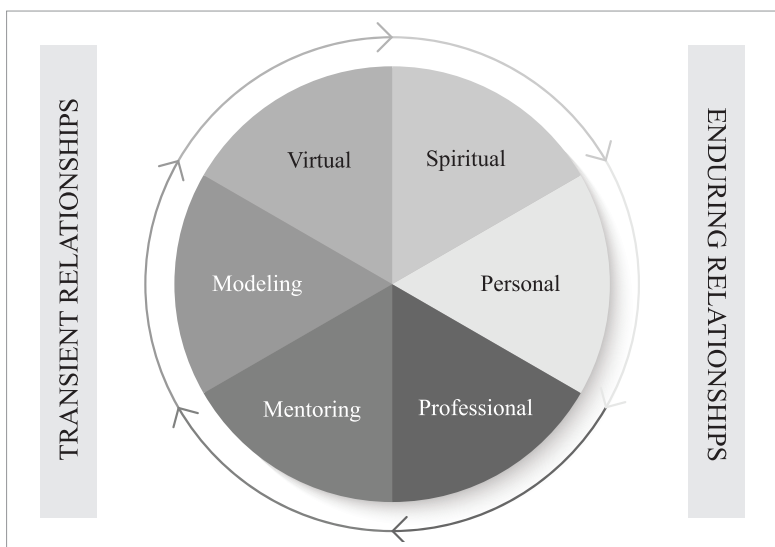
The research paradigm for this study was qualitative. Drawing on both narrative (Chase, 2011; Cresswell, 2013) and sensemaking (Abolafia, 2010; Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2007) approaches, it used an emergent design which allowed flexibility and consideration of the social milieu of the educators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Two rounds of semi-structured interviews allowed the educators to share their ‘lived experiences’ in an unrestricted biographical format that was roughly chronological and included pre-career, early-career and post-career experiences. In so doing, the educators reflected not only on their present ‘lived experiences’, but their ‘memory dispositifs’ (Basu, 2012) and the meaning they held. Chase (2011) identifies this process as ‘retrospective meaning making’ (p.636).

Interviews were transcribed and analysed through line-by-line coding, second level coding and conceptual coding until categories and subsequently themes emerged. Aiding this process was the observation of gerunds used in the transcript, the frequency of categories referred to, and the modality of the interviewee's language. A second round of interviews allowed for member checking and further questioning to confirm themes and refine categories. One theme that emerged from each individual's memories of their 'lived experiences' was relationships. This theme was made up of six distinct types of relationships (See Figure. 2.1)

What do Christian educators have to say about their relationships?

The results of the educators' sensemaking narratives have been offered as a whole and represented by Figure 1. Emerging from the data were six types of relationships that educators felt influenced their perceptions of the philosophy and practice of the Christian education system in which they worked. These relationships fell into two sub-themes: relationships that were ongoing or enduring, and relationships that were more transient in nature. Each sub-theme yielded three further categories of relationships.

Figure 2.1: Six types of relationships identified by educators as influencing their understanding and practice of Christian education.



The educators identified three types of ongoing relationships that impacted their perceptions of Christian education. These were spiritual, personal and professional relationships (See fig.1).

Spiritual relationships were identified by all participants in the study and rated strongly in their reported influence on the educators' understanding and practice of Adventist Education. Every participant valued their personal relationship with God as indicated by their biographical narrative and the emerging themes. When analysed by frequency and modality, the educators' relationships with God were a major contributor to their understanding of Christian education and their practice as teachers. While the participants did not always overtly articulate the impact that their relationship with God had on the learning environment, it was implied, as seen in this excerpt from one participant who pointed to a large heart on her classroom wall, inscribed with the words, *'Be careful what goes into your heart; it comes back and controls your behaviour'*, and then stated, *'The heart is everything. Having God in their hearts. That when they look at me; that's what I want them to see. A godly heart'* (E5). Another educator was more explicit and spoke with conviction about spiritual relationships:

If you've got a connection with God and you've got a trust that the Spirit is going to tell you when to shut up or when to say something or when ... that's powerful. And so I think that that's really when a Christian school like an Adventist school takes off, is when you've got staff members who have personally tapped into Jesus, and then what you've got is Jesus, not just a school but you've got, like, communion with your faith and that's really cool (E1).

It is not surprising that the educators identified their own relationships with Jesus Christ as influential in how they perceive and construct the learning environment. The Gospel of John identifies the relationship of Jesus to the Father as crucial to his ministry, and Wilhoit and Rozema (2005) support the notion that to be a Spirit-filled teacher has a flow-on effect into the learning environment. In this study, each of the educators agreed.

Personal relationships were also indicated as a shaping influence. As with spiritual relationships, these were more implied than overt when it came to their impacts on the learning environment, with one

participant perceiving a connection between his relationship with God and with his family.

I came from a very strong Adventist Christian family, and God has always been very much front and centre, you know, in my life and in the life of my family, and, you know, with that ... comes your parents as guides, very committed people. Dad, particularly, was a very faithful servant of the church (E6).

Another educator spoke about the importance of personal relationships beyond immediate family. This educator found his small group provided strong support for him as a person:

I meet in a small group on Tuesday nights. I love this group. It's usually me and just three other guys in their, like, '60s. Because they're generational to me I call them the three wise men. I just love soaking up their wisdom, and I just think that inter-generational connection is so important (E1).

Some educators believed that personal relationships were supportive of their own relationships with God: *'It was through those relationships that people shaped my relationship of what God was, of who God is. They made me want to know God'* (E4). Personal relationships were also perceived as supporting their role as Christian teachers:

I would have to put my wife [here]. She has always been a loyal support and friend and been willing to go wherever I needed to go; never stood in my way and has been, just really accommodating. And that's been wonderful for me in terms of helping me as an individual to be able to go on the journey that I have been on (E6).

The quality of personal relationships is less often the focus of discussions relating to what may happen in the learning environment. This study shows that educators value their personal relationships and perceive them as a source of inspiration that flows into their work.

Professional relationships appeared in the biographical transcripts more overtly. It also became apparent that more than just one-to-one relationships were perceived as important in the learning environment, but that the collective relationships of the whole staff mattered, along with intentionally creating an environment that fostered relationship building, both formally and informally. Both positive and negative professional relationships were identified from the transcripts. Three

educators expressed a sense of exclusivity about the school system, which translated into the culture of the school. One felt that other teachers perceived him as *'an unneeded temporary fix'* (E2), and another two educators struggled to initially feel welcomed into the school or school system (E2, E3). It took some positive relationship building on the part of individual colleagues to change these perceptions.

The educators in the study identified professional relationships either in general terms or in the context of mentoring. Therefore, mentoring relationships warranted a separate category. Other inter-staff relationships, both formal and informal, make up the professional relationships category. These relationships included those with the principal, with one educator reflecting that *'it's all the more important though that the person at the top—and you have that—or at the least, that you have that trust and faith in that there is a good strong, professional relationship'* (E3). The importance of a principal building strong relationships based on trust was identified in the literature (Price, 2015, Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). This parallels the relationships of Jesus with His disciples where trust and faith in Him became increasingly important as His earthly ministry moved to a close. Without that trust, the disciples would have scattered well before that final week. Even their belief in Jesus as the Messiah wavered under stress, with Peter denying Christ (John 18:17–18) and Judas openly betraying Jesus for financial gain (John 17:12). What we can take from this comparison is that the relationships a school leader builds with staff are best when established on trust. In this context it is feasible to suggest that trust may move a school's culture towards a learning environment that reveals Jesus.

It is not only the relationships of leaders with staff that influence the learning environment. One educator was very grateful for her teaching colleagues stating that *'they are the people that ... I believe God sent into my life so I could do the work I do every day'* (E5). For this educator, professional relationships featured strongly as an anchor, not only for learning and teaching, but in a spiritual capacity. Another educator, in thinking about the school as a community of faith, reflected, *'sometimes I wonder if doing it together is what it's (Christian Education) all about'*, with a further reflection, *'but as a system, that's the area we need to, in my opinion, grow and*

develop'(E1). Another affirmed, *'We know that relationships are very important in a school'* (E4), and another educator asked the rhetorical question, *'If we don't make relationships, how do people ever ask us questions of what we do believe?'* (E5). A final collaborative practice which several educators reflected on was daily staff worship, with one educator stating that *'it just made a difference to the start of the day ... and the main thing you would do would be to pray to get that guidance as to which direction to take'* (E8). Each narrative honoured the place of professional relationships in the culture of the school, although it was expressed differently for each educator. Learning and growing together is how Jesus modelled relationships. He could have accomplished His mission alone, but He chose an inner group of disciples with whom He established relationships of trust.

While professional relationships in this study centred on a sense of doing Christian education *'together'*, it appeared that this sense of togetherness as Christian educators occurred informally, rather than intentionally. While informal sharing is important, in John's Gospel we sense that Christ is very intentional in revealing His Father to His disciples. He does not leave it to a process of osmosis, but plants questions and ideas in the minds of those He trusts to keep the gospel story alive. One place where intentionality did surface in this study was in the morning worships previously mentioned where staff gathered to pray before connecting with their students.

While the literature speaks to the importance of professional learning communities, they did not emerge as a strong feature of professional relationships in this study. It appears that an opportunity exists to further develop an intentionally collegial approach to joining in learning journeys together as recommended by Stoll and Seashore Louis (2007). It also affirmed the sharing of spiritual discussions on a deeper level as Jesus did with those He associated with and met. Although at least three of the educators had attended professional development programs purposely designed to strengthen the integration of faith with learning, two commented on the inefficacy of a factual presentation by someone who was not a part of the school community, preferring rather to explore issues within the context of their school's culture. Therefore, it appears that the idea of professional learning communities taking an integrated approach to faith and the learning environment has merit and could be explored further.

The second broad theme of relationships was characterised by the transient nature of the categories (Figure 1). Although these were more likely to be fixed-term relationships, this does not diminish their importance to the investigation. The first two, mentoring and modelling relationships, occur generally within a school setting, and although there is some crossover with professional relationships, for this investigation they were identified as separate categories in that they functioned for a specific purpose, and generally for a fixed term of time. The third type of relationships to appear were virtual relationships that are not formed on a personal basis, but function as a quasi-relationship as an individual is drawn towards another's ideas or philosophy with which he or she is empathetic.

Mentoring relationships were identified by participants as occurring both formally and informally. The educators had different experiences with mentoring relationships that were dependent on both years of experience and the nature of their experiences. Although mentoring is now a formalised and documented process with the appointment of mentors in the school setting, this was not the case when most of the educators in the study began their careers. Younger educators identified experiences with both formal and informal mentoring relationships while more experienced teachers identified the value of informal mentoring relationships in their own career development within Adventist education.

Mentoring relationships occurred at all stages of the educators' journeys, from their student days to early and later career stages and became more evident when an educator relocated or changed roles in a school. Of his own pre-career education, one educator reflected that a college lecturer had a significant impact on him stating, he *'probably kept me on track. He was a real mentor and guide during my journey there'* (E6). This same participant also cited other mentors from that period of his life as inspirational people, sharing, *'I found that I was like a sponge soaking it in because I had limited exposure to that depth of intellect and also from the perspective of what Christian education was all about'* (E6).

Although there were less formal mentoring experiences for educators with many years of teaching behind them, there were many instances where informal mentoring helped them develop in teaching skills and in faith, facilitating the amalgamation of both

in the learning environment. More experienced teachers identified informal mentors in the pre-career, early career and later careers stages and explained how they survived their early years of teaching and grew in understanding of what it meant to be a Christian teacher in an Adventist school. Often, tacit knowledge was expected, so those teachers fortunate enough to be mentored informally were initiated into the world of Adventist education. It was revealed that these teachers were not paired up with a mentor teacher but relied on educators who acted informally as mentors.

In contrast, the youngest teacher who participated in this study identified the appointment of a mentor but was not intentionally mentored in what it means to belong to a school as a community of faith that reveals Jesus. Another teacher who came from a different school system felt confused, not with the teaching, but with the culture and felt he would not have stayed at the school were it not for a teacher who became a self-appointed mentor. These experiences raise the importance of mentoring at three points in an individual's career in Christian education: pre-career mentoring (where feasible) to establish initial understandings of the role of a Christian teacher; early-career mentoring to explore the role of a Christian teacher, and mentoring at the point of entering a Christian school from another school system. The building of mentoring relationships has particular relevance in a Christian learning environment where the modelling of relationships is viewed within a Christian worldview that places emphasis on a personal relationship with the God of love, grace and forgiveness. We can see the mentoring process in John's gospel as Jesus enters discussions with His disciples about the kingdom of God.

Modelling relationships occurred in school settings where teachers engaged in the school culture and found themselves in a position to observe certain attitudes and behaviour that impacted their own understandings. One educator noticed a different attitude in how the teachers at his current school approached their work compared with the four other schools he had experienced. It was a different staffroom culture that he was drawn into. In previous schools, he identified a sense of, *'I'm there to do my duty and collect my pay check'* (E1). As this educator observed the school culture through the words and actions of other staff members, he also patterned his ideas on their ideas until he realised that teaching was more than a job. It was a *'vocation'* or calling to Christian ministry.

For another educator, a modelling relationship began on his first day as a teacher at his current school when the school day began with a devotional time for teachers. As he was drawn into this community, which began every day with a focus on God and prayer, he decided that *'starting your day that way ... framing your day in that way'* (E2) had a positive impact. How people engaged in this intentional time with God influenced his own sense of daily commitment to nurture his students as he was nurtured. Educators also engaged in modelling relationships with their school principals. One educator felt his attitudes were shaped by *'watching all the teachers who have been here and seeing what [the principal] does at school, because he's very much reminding us always that students can only understand the intangible nature of love as they see it demonstrated practically in their lives'* (E5). This educator also expressed a *'strong sense of responsibility'* for teachers to be *'role models'*.

The importance of modelling was highlighted in situations where mentors were not appointed. In lieu of intentional mentoring, the educators identified educators they could observe and imitate within the culture of Christian education. As Jesus modelled His relationship with His Father, Christian educators are also models of practice for others to observe.

Virtual relationships were the least identified type of relationships to emerge from the interview transcripts (See Fig. 1). Three educators were impacted over time by reading the book *'Education'* by Ellen White, and one was impacted by *'the discussions about integration of faith and learning'* after hearing a Christian educator speak at a professional development day. He felt this single event helped him establish *'more depth of understanding and thought, of intentional effort'* (E7) in creating a learning environment where Christ was revealed. This same educator was also impacted by George Knight, an author and educator who has written widely about the philosophy of Christian education. He credited this one person as giving him a *'frame of reference, and then over time, it gradually articulated into more sophisticated ways'* (E7). From his perspective, it is this frame of reference that gives *'consistency and coherence to educational practice'* and ultimately determines the nature of the learning environment.

Each of the six relationship types identified by the educators was identified within the context of shaping their perceptions of Christian education, and therefore also influencing the nature of the learning environment. The types of relationships identified in this study varied in frequency and intensity according to the nature of the participants' lived experiences. Some relationships were identified as having a positive impact on perceptions; others were negative, but all shaped perceptions. Due to the qualitative research paradigm, the findings cannot be generalised. However, the spread of the roles and years of experience of the educators in this investigation offer a window into the types of relationships that educators value and which have the potential to influence the nature of the learning environment in which they work. The nature of the relationships identified also reflected the types of relationships that Jesus built during His earthly ministry.

What this means for practice

An exploration of John's Gospel juxtaposed against the six types of relationships identified by the educators in this study provides opportunities for thoughtful reflection on how Christian education leaders may foster and support relationships that enhance the Christian ethos of the learning environment. Some may already be happening in your school. Others may open gates of opportunity.

- a. Encourage staff in their personal journey with God in non-threatening, non-judgemental ways.
- b. Honour educators' families and the parallel roles that teachers play in their life outside of school.
- c. Develop professional learning communities that nurture spiritual conversations as well as foster shared professional learning.
- d. Pair graduate teachers, where possible, with more experienced mentor teachers who also reveal the person of Jesus Christ in all aspects of learning and teaching. If this is not possible, provide a spiritual mentor as well as a teaching mentor.
- e. Provide ethos and culture mentors for staff newly appointed to a Christian school from another school system.
- f. Encourage staff members to model their relationships on

Jesus and His approach to relationship building so that all are modelling to each other what it means to be a member of a Christian learning community.

- g. Provide professional reading or viewing from authors or speakers on topics relevant to the objectives of the school and encourage staff to explore school objectives through the written and spoken ideas of others.

While the literature identified the importance of teacher-student relationships on student achievement, socioemotional wellbeing and strong connections, this study indicates that the quality and nature of staff relationships as identified by the participating educators also have flow-on effects for the school culture and ethos through the educators' perceptions of what it means to be a Christian teacher. This investigation also provides examples from Jesus' ministry and highlights the importance of caring for personal relationships and cultivating professional relationships that have Jesus Christ at their centre. It challenges school leaders to examine the role of relationships in their school and make relationship building a priority. It may also offer insights into how Jesus may be revealed through authentic and caring relationships.

In a final statement, one of the educators interviewed summarised his perceptions this way: *'If you introduce people to a set of rules or a system or any kind of process or that's all it is, it's pretty weak. But if you introduce someone to a person, to Jesus, then it's life changing'* (E1).

References

- Abolafia, M. (2010). Narrative construction as sensemaking. *Organization Studies*, 31(3), 349–367.
- Allen, D. M., (2011). Secret disciples: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. In C. Keith & L. W. Hurtado (Eds.). *Jesus among friends and enemies: A historical and literary introduction to Jesus in the gospels*. (pp. 149–169). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Barnett, K., & McCormick, J. (2004). Leadership and Individual Principal-Teacher Relationships in Schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(3), 406–434.
- Basu, L. (2012). Ned Kelly as memory dispositif: Media, time, power and the development of Australian identities. Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter.
- Bernstein-Yamashiro, B., & Noam, G. G. (2013). *Teacher-student relationships toward personalized education* (New directions for youth development: no. 137). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Brittany, H. (2012). Building Healthy Relationships. *Black Enterprise*, 42(10), 39–40.
- Brown, A. D., Stacey, P., & Nandhakumar, J. 2007. Making sense of sensemaking narratives. *Human Relations*, 61(8), 1035–1062.
- Chan, C.S., Rhodes, J. E., Howard, W.J., Lowe, S.R., Schwartz, S.E.O. & Herrera, C. (2012). Pathways of influence in school-based mentoring: The mediating role of parent and teacher relationships. *Journal of School Psychology*, 51(1), 129–142.
- Chase, S.E. (2011). Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln, (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 651–680.
- Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2011). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln, (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 1–20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Drexler, J. (2007). *Schools as communities: Educational leadership, relationships, and the eternal value of Christian schooling*. Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design Publications.
- Edlin, R. (2014). *The Cause of Christian education* (Fourth ed.). Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press.

- Farrell, L. (2002). Relationships. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 324(7330), 179. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.databases.avondale.edu.au/10.1136/bmj.324.7330.179a>
- Gench, F. (2007). *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (First ed.). London, England: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Grace, R., Hodge, K., & McMahon, C. (2017). *Children, families and communities* (Fifth ed.). South Melbourne, Victoria: Oxford University Press.
- Healey, J. (2012). *Respectful Relationships* (Issues in Society: 336). Thirroul, Australia: The Spinney Press.
- Hendry, R. (2009). *Building and restoring respectful relationships in schools: A guide to using restorative practice*. London, England: Routledge.
- Konishi, C., Hymel, S., Zumbo, B. D., & Li, Z. (2010). Do school bullying and student-teacher relationships matter for academic achievement? A multilevel analysis. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 25(1), 19–39. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.databases.avondale.edu.au/docview/224371412?accountid=26359>
- Menon, M., Pendakur, R., & Perali, F. (2015). All in the Family: How Do Social Capital and Material Wellbeing Affect Relational Wellbeing? *Social Indicators Research*, 124(3), 889–910.
- Noller, P. & Karantzas, G. C. (2012). *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of couples and family relationships*. Chichester, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Pogodzinski, B. (2015). Administrative context and novice teacher-mentor interactions. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(1), 40–65.
- Price, H. (2015). Principals' social interactions with teachers. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(1), 116–139.
- Roffey, S. (2011). *Changing behaviour in schools: Promoting positive relationships and wellbeing*. London, England: Sage Publications.
- Rogers, Bill. I get by with a Little Help: Colleague Support in Schools [online]. Camberwell, Vic.: ACER Press, 2002. Camberwell, Vic.: ACER Press, 2002. xv, 292 p. ISBN 0864315120. Availability: <<https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=322126214324927;res=IELHSS>> ISBN: 0864315120. [cited 16 Jul 19]
- Rucinski, C. L., Brown, J. L., Downer, J. T. (2018). Teacher-child relationships, classroom climate, and children's social-emotional and academic development. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 110 (7), 992–1004. doi:10.1037/edu0000240.supp (Supplemental).
- Senker, C. (2013). *Relationships* (Teen issues). London, England: Raintree: Capstone Global Library.
- Shwartz, G., & Dori, Y. J. (2016). Looking through the eyes of mentors and novice teacher: Perceptions regarding mentoring experiences. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*. 228, 149–153.
- Stoll, L., & Seashore Louis, Karen. (2007). *Professional Learning Communities*. S. l.: Open University Press.

- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. (2015). Faculty trust in the principal: An essential ingredient in high-performing schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(1), 66–92.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. London, England: SAGE.
- White, E. (1940). *The desire of ages*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- White, E. (1943). *Counsels to parents, teachers, and students regarding Christian education*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- Wilhoit, J., & Rozema, L. (2005). Anointed Teaching. *Christian Education Journal*, 2(2), 239–255.
- Wright, N. T., & Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (2002). *John for everyone: Part I*. London, England: SPCK
- Wright, T., Ebook Library, (2010). *How to be a brilliant mentor: Developing outstanding teachers* (1st ed.). Milton Park, England: Routledge, Ebooks Corporation, & ProQuest.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Long, E. F., Brandeau, M. L., Owens, D. K. (2010). The cost-effectiveness and population outcomes of expanded HIV screening and antiretroviral treatment in the United States. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 153, 778–89. doi: 10.7326/0003-4819-153-12-201012210-00004
- Lott, B., & Webster, K. (2006). Carry the banner where it can be seen: small wins for social justice. *Social Justice Research*, 19, 123-134. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11211-006-0003-y>
- Milloy, M.-J., Marshall, B. D., Kerr, T., Buxton, J., Rhodes, T., Montaner, J., & Wood, E. (2012). Social and structural factors associated with HIV disease progression among illicit drug users: a systematic review. *AIDS*, 26, 1049-1063. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/QAD.0b013e32835221cc>