Chapter Seven

Faith Engagement at School

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Abstract

The ability of teachers to engage and develop the faith journey of students is seen as a central endeavour in faith-based schools. Much has been written in the literature regarding approaches that may be effective in facilitating this process. This study analysed qualitative data collected from 368 Year 5–12 students from one faith-based school in Australia. Students reported on the key areas they believe assist in developing their faith, in addition to aspects they believe could be improved in this regard. A significant difference was found between the attitudes of those who reported not having a faith background and those who did. This chapter builds onto findings reported in the previous chapter.

Introduction

Aristotle argued that moral virtues are acquired by the conscious repetition of virtuous acts in the same way that a person develops

skills within the arts. Thus he argues, 'we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts' (Aristotle, 350 BC, p. 18). Within this paradigm, a school's energy should be expended on ensuring that students develop and maintain the habit of 'doing the right thing' so that they will consequently become good people.

Christian education, while not ignoring the importance of 'doing good', has a unique perspective in promoting the need for an inner change that then, in turn, impacts the good people do (Atcheson, 2018). It is posited by Christian education that without this inner change, all other attempts to make a person good will result in futile efforts (Knight, 2016).

Spirituality, Religion and the Christian Faith

In defining spirituality, some authors describe it simply as a representation of the meaning and purpose we see in life, the values we cherish, and our connectedness to the world around us (for example: Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). Others, however, view spirituality as something transcending the natural experience and define it as a connection between the human and the sacred (Brownrigg, 2018). The literature in this area tends to distinguish between spirituality and religion by viewing religion as involvement in activities that are affiliated with particular religious groups, while spirituality is seen as a 'connection between a person and a higher power and how that transcends into their daily walk and behaviour' (Brownrigg, 2018, p. 57). It could be argued that within this paradigm, someone could be religious without necessarily being spiritual and likewise, a person's spiritual development could arguably occur outside the bounds of organised religion (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2008).

Within the Christian context, spirituality is seen as being evidenced by a growth in faith that is characterised by a 'Godward reorientation of life', evidenced by the desire to love and serve both God and others (Howard, 2008, p. 231). This spiritual connection is seen as being achieved by 'a life of prayer' and 'a life of care' (Howard, 2008, p. 338), resulting in a faith journey that follows Christ's example of giving and of service. This process of being shaped to conform to the image of Christ is seen as being not just for the benefit of the

individual, but also for the purpose influencing those with whom they associate (Escobar Arcay, 2011). This is seen as the key mandate of Christian education (Horan, 2017).

Christian Education

In its broadest sense, Christian education is seen as that in which there is a Christ-centred approach to learning, teaching and scholarship (Cosgrove, 2015). It is intended to be a place where there is the opportunity for the holistic development of physical, mental and spiritual powers, in preparation not only for this life but also for the life to come (White, 1952). Students should not only be able to see a connection between Christ and their schoolwork, but they should also be able to see a practical and tangible connection between Christ and their daily life (Roso, 2018).

In this context, every student is viewed as being distinctive and being called to have a personal association with Christ that is unique. 'The Bible makes it clear that every time there is a story of faith, it is completely original. God's creative genius is endless. He never, fatigued and unable to maintain the rigors of creativity, resorts to mass-producing copies' (Eugene Peterson, cited in: Mancini, 2008, p. 5).

Yet, even as each individual is seen as making a unique contribution within the world, they are seen as doing so within a company of believers where the gifts God gives are balanced by those he also gives to others (Hoekstra, 2012). Thus, the work of Christian education includes the ability to work together and to appreciate the uniqueness of others, with the recognition that 'our connections are for naught, unless God establishes those efforts' (Hoekstra, 2012, p. 168).

Christian Teachers

Christian teachers have the prodigious task of assisting students to discover Christ for themselves (Coria-Navia, Overstreet, & Thayer, 2017). Their work needs to provide an environment in which students feel supported and affirmed in their individual journey and where they can express and discuss both their successes and failures. 'Unlike indoctrination, teachers do not dismiss conflict and doubt; unlike critical inquiry, teachers do not celebrate conflict and doubt'

(Reichard, 2013, p. 292). It is a collaborative journey that teachers and students must embark on and travel together (Reichard, 2013).

Christian teachers have the responsibility to genuinely model a living connection between faith and life (Prior, 2018) and find the means to make the concepts, and their application, of personal relevance (Coria-Navia et al., 2017). Students are in search of authentic experiences and, as such, are particularly impacted by the journey of teachers for whom they view the faith journey to be real (Hoekstra, 2012). Christopher Prior (2018, p. 135), however, warns that if 'the words and actions of teachers are not coupled with policies, practices, curriculum and pedagogy that reflect the gospel, then students will be presented with a truncated gospel within a dualistic approach to schooling'.

The Current Project

As outlined in the previous chapter, the purpose of the current project is to investigate the relationship between school climate and faith engagement in Year 5–12 students within a faith-based school in New South Wales, Australia. The previous chapter focused on the importance of school climate and unpacked much of the quantitative data in relation to the project. It found that there were a number of strong relationships between self-reported school climate and the faith engagement of students and explored the influence of these variables using Structural Equation Modelling.

In addition to the quantitative data, students were also provided with the opportunity to comment on various aspects of faith engagement within their school in the following four areas:

a. Aspects of school life that they believe are effective in building their faith in God.
b. Things that may better assist their faith development.
c. Examples that show their teachers are interested in their personal faith development.
d. Additional comments students would like to make with regards to growing in faith.

There was a total of 368 valid responses from students in Year 5–12 to the survey 'My School & My Faith'. Of these, 345 (approximately

94%) chose to respond in some way to at least one of the open-ended questions. While many responses were brief, a number of students took the time to articulate, to a greater length, their perceptions of the school's influences on their faith. Results suggest student responses clustered into three key areas: *what my school does well*, *what my school should do differently*, and *how I know my teachers are interested in my faith journey*. The following sections report these findings in more detail.

What my School does Well

The most common theme in relation to what the school does well to help them build their faith (reported by 52% of participants) was the opportunity given by teachers to explore the Bible in contexts such as morning worships, chapel, Bible/religion classes, and baptismal studies. For some, these periods provided strength to help face things in life that they found hard.

> 'We have chapel and bible studies that help my friends and I get through hard times'. [Yr 6, F, Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA)]

Chapel times in general provided much comment by students, with reflections in relation to what they found particularly helpful.

> 'Listening to what God did to others. And when you need Him most you have to trust that he will help'. [Yr 6, F, Christian (non-SDA)]

> 'I think it is the best time to be a part of God's love in chapel'. [Yr 5, M, no faith background]

> '…sometimes when special speakers come in to chapel if their talks are good that also builds my faith'. [Yr 8, F, SDA]

> 'I think the praise and worship segments in Chapel help'. [Yr 11, F, SDA]

> '…it really connects me with God through singing'. [Yr 7, F, SDA]

There were, however, students who took the opportunity to push back with regards to the chapel time. Those in the upper end of high school appeared to have less of an appreciation for what this time did for them spiritually.

> '…chapels should but do not really…'. [Yr 11, M, SDA]

> 'Chapels – to a lesser effect than they should …'. [Yr 11, M, no faith background]

In addition to comments on the chapel time, 94 students (27%) made specific mention of Bible/religion classes at school. Many students saw value in the material covered and reflected positively on its impact in engaging them with their faith journey.

> 'I think all the Bible classes have done a good job at building my faith'. [Yr 6, F, Christian (non-SDA)]

> 'When we have bible lessons we learn more about God and builds our faith in him'. [Yr 7, F, Christian (non-SDA)]

Some students took time to further unpack what specifically impacts them about the Bible classes.

> 'We watch videos sometimes of people who have had experiences with God'. [Yr5, F, no faith background]

> 'Discussion with certain people, taking into account all different views …'. [Yr 11, M, Christian (non-SDA)]

> 'Explaining more deeper understandings of the Bible and outlining how to pray'. [Yr 11, M, SDA]

> 'Being able to have open discussions in classes about God and being able to [have] questions that wouldn't usually be asked – I hope we can do more of this'. [Yr 10, F, SDA]

> 'The teachers. They definitely love to talk about their beliefs and I tell to them about my religions differences and similarities'. [Yr7, F, Christian (non-SDA)]

The daily worship time was also appreciated by several students, with 33 (9.6%) specifically mentioning the value of this time. As one student commented: '*Worship because we write a verse from the Bible and I learn more' [Yr 6, F, no faith background]*. A few students also focused on particular opportunities that appeared above the usual school programme:

> 'Bible studies after school on Fridays …'. [Yr 5, M, SDA]

> 'The year 9 challenge class'. [Yr 10, M, SDA]

It also appears that students see the integration of faith into the various non-Bible classes throughout the school as being strong. As one student commented: *'We pray and talk about God in the majority of our classes and sometimes we don't even mean to' [Yr 7, M, SDA].*

In addition to formal aspects of the school programme that has a positive influence, students outlined other aspects of their experience at school that they appreciate. Although more challenging to define or quantify, they appear integral to the faith journey that students experience.

> 'The friendly and open atmosphere, with plenty of nature around the campus'. [Yr 10, M, SDA]
>
> 'The positive attitude of leaders and teachers'. [Yr 12, F, SDA]
>
> 'Teachers that have a similar belief in God'. [Yr 7, F, SDA]
>
> 'Discussions between my peers about God'. [Yr 12, M, SDA]

As outlined in the previous chapter, those who do not have a faith background have a significantly more negative perception of the school's attempts to build faith. A number of these students (n=39, 11.3%) commented in this regard when asked what aspects of the school programme most assisted them in the faith journey.

> 'None. It made me less interested in God'. [Yr 9, F, no faith background]
>
> 'When I was young and my brain was easy to fool'. [Yr 7, M, no faith background]
>
> 'I don't intend on building my faith'. [Yr 10, F, no faith background]
>
> 'I don't want to build my faith in God'! [Yr 8, F, no faith background]
>
> 'We learn about the same stories all the time it gets boring no one cares anymore we need to learn about different things not the same boring stuff'. [Yr 8, F, no faith background]
>
> 'By force feeding it its making me move away every day'. [Yr 12, M, no faith background]

It needs to be noted that it was not exclusively those of a non-faith background who provided some pushback. Some who reported being from a faith family provided their own perspectives as to how they felt in relation to the school's efforts to engage them positively in a faith journey and the reasons why.

> 'Not much, for my faith is built outside of school'. [Yr 9, F, Christian (non-SDA)]

> 'I honestly don't think any of it helps. I do it all on my own and I don't need anyone coming into my business'. [Yr 10, F, SDA]
>
> 'The thing they do for my faith is increase my knowledge of Bible stories but that isn't what is going to save me'. [Yr 11, F, Christian (non-SDA)]
>
> 'We are forced to do bible classes but they don't give us the opportunity to learn about any other religion during these classes. I refuse to put my faith in Christianity as that is the only thing I have been forced to learn'. [Yr 11, F, SDA]

Overall, however, responses from students who have a faith background were of a more positive nature, with many finding personal benefit from the efforts of the school to engage them in faith activities.

> 'Opportunities to share my story have helped me to realise what God has done in my life and is strengthening my faith in him everyday'. [Yr 12, F, SDA]
>
> 'I think this school is really helping my faith grow into what God wants me to become'. [Yr 7, M, SDA]
>
> 'I hope I can know God better and have him in my life'. [Yr 5, M, Christian (non-SDA)]

What my School Should do Differently

Students were provided the opportunity to comment on the types of things they feel the school could do differently to facilitate their faith development. A number of students did not have anything to add in this regard, with 37 (10.7%) leaving this part of the survey blank, three reporting that it was not applicable to them, 62 (18%) reporting there was nothing (or 'nothing much') that the school could do differently or better, 11 (3.2%) affirming that the school was doing well, 28 (11%) reporting that they 'don't know', and 10 (2.9%) reminding us that they are non-believers and not interested in the question.

For those who had specific suggestions to share, the comments tended to fit into one of three categories: things the students would like to see more of, things they would like to see less of, and things they would like to see done differently.

In regards to things that the students would like to see more of, the following are the key themes: longer worship times (n=8, 2.3%), more opportunities to talk about God and grow in faith (8), a stronger focus on the personal faith journey of students (9), more time to read the Bible in class (10), more 'weeks of worship' (3), more and/or longer chapels (3), more creative, engaging and interactive Bible classes (28) and more in-depth Bible-studies (2).

> 'Have longer chapels and connect to the teens better'. [Yr 10, M, SDA]
>
> 'More weeks of worship and help focus on people that want help finding God'. [Yr 9, M, SDA]
>
> 'Give us 5 minutes to read the bible by our self every so often'. [Yr 5, F, no faith background]

Suggestions by students as to what there should be 'less of' included: less 'academic faith' (graded Bible classes) (n=4, 1.1%), less 'Bible topic repetition' (n=3, 0.9%), less 'faith force' (n=42, 12%), less 'faith-discrimination' (n=10, 3%), and less 'Bible classes and chapel (or make them optional)' (n=14, 4%).

> 'Not make everything about assignments and tests and just keep religion separate out of school work'. [Yr 11, F, SDA]
>
> 'Be less pushy about being a SDA, it comes across as harsh and pressuring'. [Yr 12, F, Christian (non-SDA)]
>
> 'If we don't believe in him, they need to accept it'. [Yr 8, F, no faith background]
>
> 'Not be so forceful sometimes. Some people need to understand that some personal journeys take different amounts of time'. [Yr 12, F, no faith background]

There were 34 (9.9%) students who commented specifically on the chapel time, expressing their belief that there were things that could be done to make it more effective in their faith journey. Comments focused on aspects such as chapel speakers (variety), overall engagement, student voice, and ensuring that the time focuses on the spiritual and not on things that could be 'announced' elsewhere.

> 'There is a culture in which anything of a religious [nature] is, in a way, laughed at by the school population. People at chapel laugh at those on stage and don't get involved in any way – whether they are Christians or not. The religion program is run by some

> amazing people, but I feel like the program itself is actually not right for our demographic'. [Yr 10, F, SDA]
>
> 'I think that having speakers in Chapel that appeal well to the kids at school. When we have different people, it's likely that kids will listen more. Doing more surveys to ask the kids what they like or don't like so that the programs are better received'. [Yr 11, M, SDA]
>
> 'Inviting more interesting young people to share their testimony …'. [Yr 10, F, SDA]
>
> 'Getting different speakers from outside the school who have had different life changing experiences…'. [Yr 10, F, SDA]

How I know my Teachers are Interested in my Faith Journey

This area drew the least amount of responses, including 143 (41.4%) who either left it blank or said they did not know and a further five who reminded us that they had no interest in faith growth. Of those that did respond, 58 (16.8%) mentioned the current forms of organised faith engagement such as chapel, morning worships, and Bible/religion classes.

> 'We are required to attend chapel once a week to learn the work of God and people do grow to have a big interest or want to explore their faith'. [Yr 10, F, Christian (non-SDA)]
>
> 'They sometimes pray for certain people that need prayers'. [Yr 7, M, Christian (non-SDA)]
>
> 'They talk to me about it In bible class'. [Yr 6, F, SDA]

The largest area of comment, however, was with regards to authentic teachers who show a personal demonstration of interest in them as individuals (n=108, 31.3%). This included themes such as authentic care, genuine personal interest, effort, support and respect. Students expressed appreciation for the way the teachers engaged them on a personal level.

> '[They] ask how your life is at home how our relationship is with God and ways we could help that'. [Yr 7, M, SDA]
>
> 'They ask about how we are feeling and try to make aspects of class and chapel personal'. [Yr 10, F, SDA]

> ‘Constantly reminding us that there is a God and he loves and has a purpose for us’. [Yr 9, F, Christian (non-SDA)]
>
> ‘That they go to a lot of effort to teach their religion’. [Yr 9, F, Christian (non-SDA)]

Seven students expressed appreciation for the respect the teachers show to other faiths and that they do not feel pressured.

> ‘They talk in what I believe in, and what similarities I have in my culture compared to the Christian world’. [Yr 9, F, non-Christian faith]
>
> ‘Most teachers are open to questions about Christianity and are accepting of both Christians and non-Christians’. [Yr 10, F, SDA]

The additional effort that teachers go to was specifically commented on by students, with 29 (8.4%) students commenting on this area.

> ‘One teacher takes bible studies for myself and a group of friends during a lunchtime every week’. [Yr 10, M, SDA]
>
> ‘They go around 1 on 1 to help us in bible class to explain things and answer questions’. [Yr 6, F, SDA]
>
> ‘She wants to see us in heaven’. [Yr 5, M, SDA]
>
> ‘I am the first 7day adventist in my family, I attend bible studies on Friday night and salt that is at college church and then every Saturday go to church and on Sundays I go to bible studies again’. [Yr 9, F, SDA]

Discussion

It is common for faith-based schools to represent a wide variety of faith backgrounds, with each group reflecting unique perspectives on the opportunities provided for faith engagement. While those who do not have a faith background (and who expressed no interest in developing one) often pushed back at this aspect of the school’s programme, those who had a faith background, even one other than Christianity, were usually positive about the opportunities and the respect afforded them.

> ‘My teachers always listen with interest to what everyone has to say and they make suggestions about them. They also encourage you to do good deeds and help other people and treat them nicely. My teachers are a great influence on their students’ life’. [Yr 7, F, non-Christian faith]

> 'They asked me what belief I am, if I say Hindu, some teachers say, "isn't that the oldest religion". Each teacher knows that my faith is growing by the day goes past.' [Yr 10, M, non-Christian faith]

The qualitative data strongly reinforced the results of the quantitative data reported in the previous chapter, with regards to the negative attitudes of many of the students who do not come from a faith background of any kind. One of the limitations of this study, however, is that information was not collected on how long students had been at the school. For example, it would be valuable to know if students from a non-faith background had completed their primary education at the school, or if they demonstrated significantly different attitudes towards faith engagement than those who had come into the school for the first time in high school.

For those who report being from a faith background, however, and are keen to continue to grow their faith, strong evidence exists for the effectiveness of what the school provides. While they have provided some critique about ways to increase engagement in programmes, such as chapels, weeks of worship and religious studies classes, it is evident that they find within the school effective means to support their desire to develop in their faith.

> 'I think this school is really helping my faith grow into what God wants me to become'. [Yr 7, M, SDA]

> 'I feel disconnected from God in the last few months, but feel blessed by coming to this school'. [Yr 11, M, SDA]

> 'I want to learn more about faith and believing in God'. [Yr 8, F, SDA]

> 'They convince us that God is real because they want our faith to grow'. [Yr 9, F, non-Christian faith]

> 'They tell everyone that their lives have changed for the better with God and that they want to show us how good He is'. [Yr 11, F, Christian (non-SDA)]

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is considerable evidence to indicate that positive perception of school climate decrease as adolescents age. The current research suggests that this is also true for adolescent attitudes towards faith engagement. This accords with other literature that observes a decrease in spiritual interest during the adolescent years (Michaelson et al., 2019). Some

argue that these changes are a natural result of changes in cognition and in the emergence of independent thinking that develops during adolescence (Crone, 2017; Kloep, 2016). Hoekstra (2012) suggests that during this time, the youth are in particular need of adults who can fill supporting roles, giving adolescents the opportunity to explore ideas about spirituality in a safe environment.

Student-Teacher Relationships

It is evident from many of the student's comments that personal one-on-one relationships have a significant impact on their faith growth. Comments – such as 'they care' [Yr 5, M, no faith background], 'they listen' [Yr 6, F, no faith background] and 'helping us in tough times' [Yr 5, M, no faith background] – were particularly evident among the Year 5–6 cohort.

The importance of positive student-teacher relationships in facilitating faith development has been acknowledged extensively within the literature. 'Meaningful teacher-student relationships play a significant role in student engagement' (Coria-Navia et al., 2017). This time spent developing relationships subsequently adds authenticity when sharing spiritual truths (Hoekstra, 2012), providing a context for support, motivation and a 'sense of fit' (Derrico, Tharp, & Schreiner, 2015, p. 298). A study by Horan (2017), for example, reported on a mixed-methods study involving 504 secondary educators and their perceptions about spiritual formation. One of the key findings was in relation to the importance of relationships. She concluded that 'educators must develop personal, one-on-one relationships with millennials as role models and mentors' and that 'one-on-one rapport, mutual respect, and relationship building between educators and teenagers is essential to spiritual growth and will have "immeasurable effects"' (Horan, 2017, p. 66).

Student Voice

Another important theme relates to that of 'student voice' and an openness to listen to alternative points of view. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the importance of student voice has been highlighted in the literature with regards to building a positive school climate (Fleming, 2017; Lewis & Burman, 2008; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Several students expressed their appreciation of this within the school.

> 'Mr XDF letting us ask questions and being okay with us having differences'. [Yr 9, M, SDA]
>
> 'Open discussions in classes about God and being able to ask questions that wouldn't usually be asked'. [Yr 10, F, SDA]
>
> 'Some teachers will strike up faith based conversations in which they ask for our personal opinions in a genuine manner'. [Yr 11, M, SDA]

The importance of student voice in faith development has been clearly identified within the literature. A study reported by Andy Wolfe (2018), for example, reported on data collected from 10 faith-based schools, through student focus groups. He concluded that the Christian ethos of a school is created through the interaction of all participants within the school community and furthermore, that students need an effective voice within this process.

> These young people are active agents, they make an essential contribution to the nature of the ethos. This shows that the Christian ethos of a school cannot be imposed: it is dependent on the contribution of all members of the school community. (Wolfe, 2018, p. 176)

For students, having a voice helps to provide relevancy to the learning process (Ateh & Charpentier, 2014). Trott (2013, p. 489) goes as far as to claim that 'learning cannot occur if learners are not assured a significant voice in their learning'. It is evident that students in the current generation expect ongoing dialogue and will be unlikely to develop a Christian identity without this opportunity (Skinner, 2018).

The current study would suggest that providing further opportunities to engage students in constructive dialogue will prove valuable, positively impacting school climate through the increased use of student voice. This dialogue will also be useful in demonstrating to students that the school is attentive and responsive to the data collected and that their voice is considered important when it comes to ongoing school improvement.

While many students are satisfied with the current methods for engaging in faith activities, there are those who provide substantial pushback within this aspect of school life. The ability to engage this group in open conversation may provide a vehicle to increase mutual understanding and a pathway by which both perspectives can be responded to in a positive manner. It also offers students additional

insight into the ethos of Christianity by modelling tolerance and respect towards those with differing world views.

Conclusion

It is encouraging that the majority of students from a faith background have an interest in continuing to engage in their faith journey. While some students 'push back' on what they consider to be 'faith pressure', many of them express appreciation for the considerable opportunities provided by the school. While it is acknowledged that the current generation is inclined to approach religion with a fair degree of scepticism, they still 'expect their faith to make a difference and have meaning on their lives' (Skinner, 2018). The students' comments would indicate that, for many, their faith makes a difference and indeed has meaning in their lives.

Students from all backgrounds freely provided several suggestions as to how they believe their faith journey could be enhanced within the school setting. It would be valuable for schools to run regular focus groups with different year levels in order to tap into the various suggestions that students have. This would provide an ongoing opportunity for dialogue and demonstrate to students that their ideas are valuable and integral to the ongoing faith development plans at school.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a focus on school climate and on aspects most relevant to the individual school context could be valuable and may provide benefits for the faith engagement endeavours of the school. Indeed, for those who push back at the more overt forms of faith development, this area may provide a useful base for the success of future initiatives.

It will also be useful for future studies to differentiate between those who have been at the school for many years and those who are new to the school. This will assist in determining the point at which students' attitudes may be diverging from those the school would wish to incorporate as part of its 'cultural norms'.

It is clear from the students' responses that faith-based education has a significant impact on many students. The desire to grow in faith and to have a meaningful and relevant journey is alive and well, and the efforts of the school to facilitate this journey is valued and appreciated.

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