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Faith Formation: Perceptions of Primary and High School Students in Australian Adventist Schools

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Key words: faith formation, spirituality, Adventist Encounter Curriculum, religious education

Abstract

Faith formation is a topic of considerable interest for those involved in Christian education. In this quantitative investigation, 580 students from Years Four, Six, Eight and Ten from eleven Adventist schools in Australian were surveyed to determine their perspectives of their own faith formation in four areas of their lives: *Vision*, *Gospel*, *Lordship* and *Presence*. Additional items measured student satisfaction with their Biblical Studies classes. The results indicated that students, on the whole, were positive about their faith formation. Trends revealed that younger students overall were more positive towards their faith and Biblical Studies classes than high school students with a gradual decline in levels of agreement with survey items as the Year levels increased.

Context and purpose

The total population of children educated in Christian schools in Australia has been increasing steadily over the past two decades (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2013). Parents are attracted to Christian Education for many reasons including the quality of the learning and teaching, a well balanced program and the strong emphasis on values (Beamish & Morey, 2012). For some, their own Christian beliefs and their desire for their children to learn in a Christian atmosphere are key factors. For these parents the Christian ethos of the school and the religious education curriculum it follows are of prime importance (Beamish & Morey, 2012). Many Christian schools offer a religious education curriculum as part of the regular school program. While these differ in approach and implementation, each seeks to connect students with God in a way that builds a relationship with him. This study was intended to inform the key stakeholders of Adventist Schools in Australia and New Zealand of the perceptions of students in the area of faith formation across a spread of ages and their attitudes toward the Adventist Encounter Curriculum.

Background information
Spirituality and faith formation

The term spirituality is broad and challenging to define (Nazar & Kouzinkanani, 2013); even more so when applied to children or adolescents. Once the domain of religious belief systems in both the eastern and western worlds, the term spirituality has been continually widening to become inclusive of individuals who do not claim any religious affiliation (King, Clardy & Ramos, 2014; Hay & Nye, 2006). Representative of these views is Mata (2014) who defines spirituality as "an innate, human characteristic that allows us to connect with transcendence and/or the divine and feel part of the universe. Spirituality thus encompasses the individual capacity and the essence of life, providing humans with a greater consciousness and more profound understanding of being" (p. 24). Supporting this view of self-transcendence and connectedness are Borgman (2006), Kline (2008) and King et al. (2014) who allude to the quest for the sacred and the feelings and behaviours that accompany it as the essence of spirituality.

While these broad definitions of spirituality touch on the concept of the sacred or divine, they stop short of acknowledging the supreme God. For this reason the term faith formation or faith development has been

adopted by many Christian denominations and is used for this investigation, rather than the less precise term, spiritual formation which has multiple meanings.

Faith formation as a term describes a process occurring in an individual who develops a relationship with a deity. For those who hold a Christian worldview, this deity is God, although it is acknowledged that adherents to all belief systems practise faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Fowler's early work places faith development or formation as a framework for knowledge and understanding about God or a higher being and the resulting influence of this understanding on one's values, beliefs, purpose and relationships (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Several models of faith development exist in the literature. Westerhoff and Fowler (Fisher, 2010) both propose a number of stages in the faith journey, suggesting that faith formation is linked to human development. Not all faith formation models are linear (Ault, 2001), though most do allude to chronological stages in the life of an individual, and have roots in Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Feldman, 2004), Erickson's Stages of Life Theory and Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory (Fisher, 2010).

Faith formation does not occur in isolation, although Allen (2012) argues for a "default intuition that God exists" (p. 71) when it comes to young children. Nazar & Kouzinkanani (2013) posit that "despite widely diverse concepts of God [held by children], there is a characteristic conviction of a personal relationship with some external, transcendent power" (p. 1), a position supported by Ratcliff & May (2004). Although this conviction is a starting point for faith formation, the process relies in part, on knowledge that comes primarily from the social-cultural setting as children learn about faith within the context of an organised religion (King et al., 2014), from family members, significant others and peers (Nazar & Kouzinkanani, 2013; Christie & Christian, 2012; Lawson, 2011; Pettit, 2008, Haight, 2004). One of these social-cultural influences is the school, and when it is a Christian school, the impact of faith and values on adolescent students is enhanced (Gane, 2013). Biblical Studies' teachers are central both to Christian schools and to the faith formation of students. Teachers can positively influence children's perceptions of God (de Roos, 2006) and need to be skilful with explaining challenging concepts in alternative ways (Court, 2010). In addition, Court (2010) points out that listening in respectful ways in order to understand students is also a high priority, and further posits that as young children grow intellectually, their pre-intellectual concepts of God are replaced with more sophisticated concepts. Therefore, unless authentic examples of mature faith are modelled, relationships with God may flounder, even though biblical knowledge is increasing.

In a study of adolescent spirituality that included diverse belief systems and participants who were strong adherents to their faith, King et al. (2014) discovered that adolescents ascribed their fidelity to a worldview consisting of beliefs, morals, values and purpose to their religious beliefs; a finding that has implications for Christian education.

Faith formation curriculum in Christian education

It has been a long held premise that Christian education serves a dual purpose, to educate both for now and for eternity. The practice of nurturing faith formation alongside a more traditional curriculum is evident in the documentation of Australian Christian schools, and is indicative of the higher purpose that each system espouses (Cairney, Cowling & Jensen, 2011; Roy, 2008; Edlin & Thompson, 2006).

Within a school culture where relationships, ethos and extra curricula activities all contribute to faith formation (Roy, 2008), the Biblical Studies or Faith Formation curriculum also plays a significant role. Jackson (2011) takes Frame's (2010) model of Lordship, drawn from 1 John, to identify three essential components of faith formation that should be addressed by a Biblical Studies curriculum. These are knowledge of the gospel, heart assent to the gospel and commitment to living a transformed life, all built on a strong biblical foundation. Newton (2014), in his model, aligns with Frame (2010) but labels the essential components as mind, emotions and will. A third model by Court (2010) explores the dilemma of combining systematic biblical learning and inquiry with nurturing a faith relationship with God. Court (2010) focuses on the cognitive, practical/moral and spiritual aspects of faith formation, and proposes a new application for Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development in which the innocent faith of children intermingles with biblical knowledge, and mature concepts emerge without destroying intuitive faith. She maintains that this process, which encourages both the cognitive and imaginative participation of learners, will both build biblical knowledge and nurture faith.

The ages that children traditionally attend school are the years when they are forming beliefs about themselves and the world. George Barna (2003), researcher for Christian ministries identifies the ages five to twelve as the most impressionable for developing ethical and religious beliefs, values and attitudes, and furthermore has found that the likelihood of children accepting Christ as their Saviour declines during and after adolescence. Another possible factor impacting on faith formation is gender. The evidence in this area is scant, and relates mainly

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to moral or ethical development rather than beliefs per se, but posits that females have a higher operational level of moral judgement (White, 1999), which would indicate the ability to transfer beliefs into action.

In an attempt to do more than merely add biblical knowledge to the lives of students, the Adventist Encounter Curriculum has deliberately sought to foster faith formation in four areas of the child's life: *Vision*, *Gospel*, *Lordship* and *Presence*, an idea that resonates with Jackson's (2011) belief that religious education "is about God speaking to his image and revealing how we were designed to live as God's image, in God's world, God's way" (p. 64).

Faith formation and the Encounter Adventist Curriculum

The Adventist Encounter Curriculum adopts a fourfold approach to faith formation. Building on the Ben Maxson's (2002) model, four domains of faith formation: *Vision*, *Gospel*, *Lordship* and *Presence*, are intentionally built into a transformational planning framework. Each domain adds an important element to the curriculum and is structured to take students beyond the acquisition of information and into the realm of formation (Cobbin, 2012).

The focus of the *Vision* domain is creating an accurate picture of God and His character, actions and relationship to humanity. An accurate picture of God is crucial to faith formation as students will not be attracted to a God who is portrayed as vindictive, inconsistent or distant. Perhaps this is why Allen (2012) presents a compelling case for teaching the characteristics of God starting at an early age. Young children speak of God "in a literal manner, with very little symbolism present" (Collins, Devenish, Moroz & Reynolds, 1999, p. 80). Collins et al. (1999) also highlight the diminishing belief in God as creator and changing perceptions in the humanness of God as children grow.

The *Gospel* domain covers what Jesus Christ has done and is doing in the lives of individuals. It includes an understanding of the nature and origin of sin, the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the resulting gift of eternal life. An understanding of sin is foundational to an understanding of forgiveness and grace, and Andersen (2011) points out that the concept of sin is "intellectually uncomfortable, but profoundly important" (p. 53). Anderson's view is supported by Sisemore (2004) who believes that children should be taught sensitively and biblically in order to combat the "symptoms of sin" (p. 230). As teachers guide students to a greater understanding of the biblical metanarrative, forgiveness and grace can be understood in their fullness, and acceptance of Christ's sacrifice becomes a reality.

> "
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The *Lordship* domain focuses on commitment to letting God lead in the life. It moves past understanding to acceptance and becomes a lifestyle choice. As Maxson (2002) puts it, "Lordship is intimacy with God through the indwelling Christ integrated into daily life. It is the result of accepting Christ as Saviour, Owner, and present within us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit" (p. 2). This domain deals with a personal devotional life and includes surrendering the will to Christ, prayer life and time spent building a relationship with God through Bible study. It is a process of 'building disciples'. A disciple, according to Matthew 28:16-20 is one, who having pledged allegiance to Christ, lives with and learns from the Lord with the ultimate aim of introducing others to the Kingdom of Grace and transforming lives. It is not just about faith, but also about faithfulness (Dunnill, 2006). This concept of biblical discipling is supported by Maxson (2002) who describes it as "the art of shaping the life of an individual into growing partnership with God" (p. 3) and integrating Christ's lordship into every area of daily life. Lordship is a progression growing out of the gospel news of salvation, and leads into the final domain of *Presence*.

The *Presence* domain indicates integrating the attendance of God into every event of an individual's life. This domain of faith formation has been blended with *Lordship* by some authors (Newton, 2014; Jackson, 2011) but can be distinguished by placing the focus on an invisible but palpable relationship with God, which guides thoughts, and ultimately actions. Graham (2009) expresses this idea succinctly as "closing the gap between the beliefs that we profess and those that control what we do" (p. 11). It includes the realms of relationships, worship and service. This idea is consistent with the findings of King et al. (2014) who posit that young people perceived spirituality as more than merely subscribing to an ideology, but also behaving in a manner consistent with one's held beliefs, including "intentionally making a contribution through acts of service or acts of leadership" (p. 200).

The literature indicates that a sense of spirituality is widespread among school age children and that faith formation is a multi-faceted process occurring over a period of time. Although sometimes linked to chronological age, it is also viewed as the development of different components within an individual, rather than stages to attain. It is evident that a Biblical Studies curriculum should seek ways to foster rather than limit the faith formation process. Adventist Encounter Curriculum has been intentionally structured with faith formation as its goal.

Method

The investigation was conducted in eleven Adventist schools representing all states in Australia. The respondents were all students in Years 4, 6, 8, and 10 (n = 580) for whom parental/carer consent was given. As this is a longitudinal study, the year levels were chosen to avoid the NAPLAN Australian testing schedule for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Research procedures met the ethics compliance for Avondale College of Higher Education. At the time of the survey, all year levels had less than one year's

Table 1: Cohort by year in school and gender

year	male	female	total respondents
year 4	68	80	148
year 6	64	66	130
year 8	77	77	154
year 10	83	65	148
total	292	288	580

exposure to the Adventist Encounter Curriculum except Year 8 which had 1.5 years of exposure. The breakdown of participants by year and gender is shown in Table 1.

Students completed a survey with 56 items using a Likert scale with four levels of agreement (Strongly Disagree =1, Disagree =2, Agree =3 and Strongly Disagree =4). Items for the questionnaire were informed by existing Spiritual Assessment and Growing Disciples Inventories (Hall, Keith & Edwards, 2002; Bradford, G., 2012). A pilot survey with Year 4 and Year 8 students was administered to test the item wording. On the final survey, eight of the items identified students' perceptions of Bible classes, their teachers and school faith events, and the remaining items identified perceptions of the students' faith formation across the four domains - Vision, Gospel, Lordship and Presence (see Figure 2).

The data from the questionnaires were entered into the statistical software package IBM SPSS Statistics v21 (2012). Descriptive statistics for each domain scale were determined along with an internal reliability measure using Cronbach's Alpha. Independent groups t-test and one-way between groups ANOVA with post-hoc comparisons was run to locate any differences of significance in the data.

Additionally, the data was split by gender and the domains were examined by year level to see if there was a significant difference between the mean responses of males and females.

Results

Table 3 shows the mean, standard deviation and Cronbach's Alpha co-efficient for each of the domains. It can be seen that for the domain Vision (α = 0.915), the reliability is 'excellent' and for the other three domains the reliabilities are in the range 'good'. Therefore the domains of the survey are internally reliable.

The mean Likert score by year level and domain is shown in Table 4. In every domain there is a decrease in mean as the students progress through school.

A Oneway ANOVA was calculated to identify mean differences in responses across domains. (see Table 5). Though Table 4 shows the gradual decline of responses over years, Table 5 shows where these differences are statistically significant. The data reveal that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of Year 4 /Year 8 and Year 4/Year 10 and Year 6/Year 10 for each domain. There is even a significant difference for Year 6/Year 8 for all but the Vision Domain.

A further finding from the data was that in every year level for every domain, females answered more positively than males. Although this was consistent, the only statistically significant gender difference was for the Presence Domain in Year 10.

Particular attention is now given to items 49 – 56. The percentage of positive responses to these items is plotted in Figure 1. These items measured students' perceptions of Bible classes, Bible teachers and other school programs of a spiritual nature. Because these items were not really a domain, they are now discussed separately. All items demonstrated a similar trend towards higher agreement levels with the statement in the lower Years and declining levels of agreement through Years, 6, 8 and 10. Items 50 and 54 were the exceptions, and these will be dealt with in the discussion.

Discussion

The results of this survey, when read in the context of the literature, identify some trends and patterns of thinking that are evident in primary and secondary students in regards to their faith formation. Overall, the results indicated strong levels of agreement with central beliefs about God and salvation, and varied aspects of Christian lifestyle, with a range of mean scores from 2.74 (Agree) to 3.56 (Strongly Agree) on a four level Likert scale.

The fact that in every domain student responses became weaker in agreement as the cohort became

" that in every domain student responses became weaker in agreement as the cohort became more senior is not a suprising result "

Table 2:   Summary of items by category

	number of items	specific items
vision statements statements to measure the student's understanding of who God is and what He wants to do in and through him/her		
God's character	4	1–4
God's actions	5	5–9
God's relationship to me	4	10–13
gospel statements statements to measure the student's belief and understanding of what Jesus Christ has done, and is doing for him/her		
forgiveness	4	14–17
grace	4	18–21
application	4	22–25
lordship statements statements to measure the student's commitment to letting God lead in his/her life		
surrender	4	26–29
prayer	3	30–32
bible study/personal devotions	4	33–36
gospel statements statements to measure the student's commitment to integrating the presence of God into every area of his/her life		
relationships	4	37–40
worship	4	42–44
service	4	45–48
miscellaneous statements statements relating to students' perceptions of school faith formation effectiveness		
Bible classes	5	49, 52, 53, 54, 56
Bible teachers	1	51
other school events	2	50, 55

more senior is not a surprising result given the tendency for young people to think more critically about issues as they progress through school. Indeed, one could look at the results with a certain amount of discouragement when they see students' connections to spiritual things decline over the years even though they are attending a Christian school. It has to be remembered however that in Year 6 students are just approaching Piaget's Formal Operational Stage where children begin to think in the abstract and can involve themselves in deductive reasoning and more critical thinking (Feldman, 2004). This trend also concurs with Collins et al. (1999) who posit that young children's perceptions of God are very literal, and Court (2010) who identifies young children as having pre-intellectual concepts of God which change as they grow and their thinking becomes more sophisticated. Furthermore, though there is this significant decrease over years of schooling, the

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and reliability by domain

domain	items	mean	standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
vision	1–13	3.37	0.66	0.915
gospel	14–26	3.18	0.63	0.886
lordship	27–37	3.02	0.63	0.838
presence	38–48	3.03	0.54	0.778

Table 4: Mean likert score for each domain by year level

domain	items	year 4	year 6	year 8	year 10
vision	1–13	3.56	3.49	3.30	3.17
gospel	14–26	3.34	3.34	3.15	2.94
lordship	27–37	3.29	3.15	2.91	2.74
presence	38–48	3.33	3.10	2.88	2.82
school*	49–56	3.27	3.06	2.92	2.64

*made up of miscellaneous questions and not considered a domain but included for analysis

Table 5: ANOVA showing mean difference between year levels by domain

domain	items	year 4	year 6	year 8	year 10
vision	1–13	3.56	3.49	3.30	3.17
gospel	14–26	3.34	3.34	3.15	2.94
lordship	27–37	3.29	3.15	2.91	2.74
presence	38–48	3.33	3.10	2.88	2.82
school*	49–56	3.27	3.06	2.92	2.64

*made up of miscellaneous questions and not considered a domain but included for analysis

declines during and after adolescence. Therefore this domain should be given special consideration during the primary school years and regular opportunities provided for children to accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour. This finding also suggests the need for continued faith development scaffolding through high school so increased biblical knowledge can enhance intuitive faith (Court, 2010).

The gender differences, although minimal, were consistent. Females scored higher levels of agreement in all four domains with a significant gender difference evident in the Presence domain. As this domain is described as the student's commitment to integrating the presence of God into every area of his/her life, it aligns with White's (1999) research on ethical and moral development.

The final six items on the survey aimed to discover students' perceptions of Biblical

> *Children need to be introduced to Jesus and make a decision for Him before they leave primary school*

means remain strong even as the students enter adolescence. This is even more so when one considers that many of the students who responded to the survey may be in a Christian school, but they do not all come from a Christian family.

The fact that children need to be introduced to Jesus and make a decision for Him before they leave primary school is further evidenced by the data in Table 4. This dealt with themes of salvation and acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The declining agreement trend across year levels supports Barna's (2003) finding that the likelihood of children accepting Christ as their saviour

Studies classes, their Bible teachers and faith-based school events. As within the domains, lower year level students responded more positively to the statements, *I enjoy what I learn in Bible classes, my Bible teacher is helping me to develop a relationship with God, the activities I do in Bible classes help me to understand what God is like, and I learn a lot during Bible classes*, with a gradual decline in agreement as Year levels increased. While this trend reflects developmental stages (Court, 2010; Feldman, 2004), and possibly acknowledges sociocultural influences (Nazar & Kouzinkanani, 2013; Christie & Christian, 2012; Lawson, 2011;

Pettit, 2008, Haight, 2004), it also raises awareness of how children's perceptions may change, especially as they enter adolescence.

The response to item 54: *I wish Bible classes were more relevant to me and my life*, showed the greatest uniformity amongst the cohorts. They uniformly disagreed that Bible classes should be more relevant to their lives. Unfortunately this is difficult to interpret because it could either mean that Bible classes are already relevant to their lives and they do not need them to be any more so, or it could mean that Bible classes are not that relevant, but they are happy for it to be that way. In the next survey, this item will be reworked as: *Bible classes are relevant to my life*.

Item 50 is written in the negative and thus produces a dip on the plot in Figure 1. Clearly students are disagreeing that compulsion is their main reason for attending chapels, which is a pleasing result. Again it is the Year 10 cohort who, though generally disagreeing that they attend chapel because it is compulsory, are not as strong in that response as the other year levels. All year levels demonstrated a peak in the number of students who strongly agreed with the statement (Item 55) *I feel closer to God during special Weeks of Worship*. This is a positive result which supports the notion that the sociocultural aspects of the school program (Nazar & Kouzinkanani, 2013; Christie & Christian, 2012; Lawson, 2011; Pettit, 2008, Haight, 2004), complement the Biblical Studies curriculum in

growing the faith of students.

Taken as a whole, the findings support Court's (2010) application of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and highlight the importance of intentionally scaffolding children in their faith formation.

Recommendations

There are three recommendations rising out of this investigation, all related to future research. It is recommended that the results be tracked biennially (next in mid 2015), to develop a faith formation profile of specific cohorts as they advance through the grades. It is also recommended that the gender difference identified in the *Presence* domain be a further topic for investigation. In addition, this was a quantitative investigation which revealed perceptions of students. What it did not reveal was why the students responded as they did. Therefore the final recommendation is to supplement the quantitative data collection of the next survey with qualitative data that explores why students gave certain responses.

Conclusion

Overall, the results from this survey demonstrate that the students' perceptions of their faith formation at all year levels were generally positive. Year 4 students had greater levels of agreement on most items with a gradual decline in agreement through Years 6, 8 and 10. Gender differences were minimal in all domains

> *Taken as a whole, the findings … highlight the importance of intentionally scaffolding children in their faith formation*

Figure 1: Student agreement with selected items
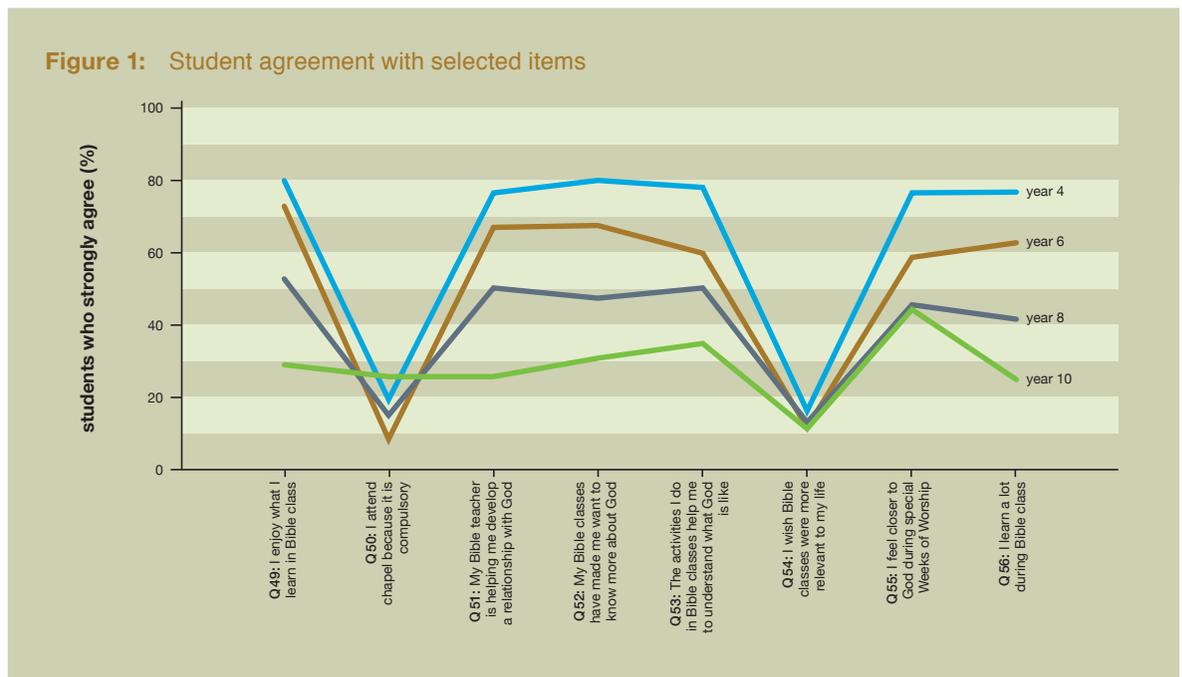
except for the domain *Presence* where females were significantly higher in agreement. The importance of creating opportunities for primary school children to accept Jesus Christ as their saviour was identified, with continued scaffolding through high school suggested. This investigation will be continued into the future on a wider scale to try and determine the source of weakening levels of agreement in senior students. **TEACH**

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