

TEACH^R

Christian schooling: Teachers' understanding of purpose and practice

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Abstract

Christian schools are faith-based communities offering education consistent with their particular approach to the Christian faith. Using language such as “Bible-based” or “Christ-centred”, Christian schools routinely suggest they provide a distinctively Christian approach to education. Central to the preservation of this approach is the teacher.

This paper is based on research into Christian Education National (CEN) teachers' understandings of the purposes of Christian schooling and how students are exposed to Christianity in their school, including their classrooms.

This research identified that, despite varied understandings of the purposes for, or goals of, Christian schooling, teachers perceived that the Christian faith should be evident across all aspects of the Christian school.

Within classrooms, in addition to Bible reading, classroom devotions, and prayer, teachers suggested students were exposed to the Christian faith through the example set by staff. Further, teachers taught from a Christian perspective, or connected curriculum content with the Christian faith as opportunities arose.

Introduction

Established by church communities or associations of Christian parents, Christian schools are faith-based institutions offering education consistent with their particular approach to the Christian faith. As a Christian alternative to government schooling, Christian schools routinely suggest they possess purposes and practices that are different from those of government or secular schools; a distinctively Christian approach to education (Smith 2018). At

the heart of Christian schooling is an education grounded in the Bible, often expressed as “Bible-based and Christ-centred” (Twelves, 2005). Certainly, the goals of Christian schooling include the achievement of high academic standards and the preparation of students for life beyond school, including employment. In addition, Christian schools suggest outcomes that include enabling young people to “think critically about their faith” (Etherington, 2014, p. xvii) and “preparing students to live godly lives in God’s world” (Dowson, 2014, p. 43). Yet, in practice, the education that Christians offer in pursuit of their goals vary. Some Christians understand Christian schooling to include the employment of Christian staff who can model the Christian faith in word and action, and the addition of times of prayer, scripture classes, and chapel (Etherington, 2008). Another approach seeks to embed the faith across all elements of practice including regular class instruction (Collier, 2013).

Christians utilize a variety of approaches to integrate faith and learning in classrooms, including: teacher embodiment, Christian practices, spontaneous integration, and planned integration. Teacher embodiment understands that teachers are to model, or embody, the Christian faith. Through their words and actions teachers demonstrate to students how to live and make choices that honour God (Scouler, 2010). Also known as the parallel approach, Christians may look to integrate Christianity and learning by exposing students to certain Christian practices such as prayer, Bible reading, and class devotions. In spontaneous integration, teachers discuss biblical concepts as appropriate moments arise in lessons (MacCullough, 2016). These “teachable moments” occur as students pose questions, during times of discussion, or as the curriculum content prompts the teacher. Planned integration understands the need to connect the biblical story to the curriculum. Teachers begin with the curriculum and look to

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naturally connect it to the biblical story, often utilising a biblical worldview.

This research was situated within the Christian Education National (CEN) network of Christian schools. Previously known as Christian Parent Controlled Schools, CEN is a predominantly Christian parent established and parent governed Christian schooling movement that seeks to integrate faith and learning in a manner described as distinctive or distinctively Christian (Dickens, 2013; Justins, 2002; Prior, 2018). The CEN vision includes the affirmation of the lordship of Christ over all of life, the Gospel rather than culture informing practice, and parental responsibility for the education of their children. In CEN schools, it is envisioned that children will be inspired to follow a Christian way of living and equipped with a biblical worldview that can be utilized as an aspect of their Christian discipleship (CEN, 2019). Consistent with their emphasis on the lordship of Christ over all of life, CEN schools seek not to be dualist replicas of government schools with the addition of Christian staff and a smattering of Christian practices combined with otherwise secular schooling. Instead, they adopt a holistic approach to education, expecting the biblical story to shape all aspects of school culture (Justins, 2014).

In CEN there has been a tendency to be “wary of mandated curricula and educational paradigms” (Dickens, 2013, p. 222). While all of the above approaches to the integration of faith and learning may be evident, a particular focus within CEN has been the use of biblical worldview as a means to holistically integrate faith and the curriculum (Engelhardt, 2012). Often including a Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration schema, a biblical worldview has been utilised to ensure that teachers and students can critique both the curriculum and culture from a biblical perspective.

This study originated as part of a larger project on the perceptions and practices of those employed within the CEN association of Christian schools. An assumption of this study was that the teacher was central to the preservation of the particular approach to education of the Christian school. That is, within Christian schools, there is an expectation that teachers are competent educators who are also able to live out their Christian faith in the day-to-day life of the school, including in classroom practice (Neidhart & Carlin, 2011). To date, there are few studies on teachers’ understanding of Christian schooling within the CEN association of Christian schools. There is, however, evidence of how teachers include a Christian perspective into classroom practice within one particular school (Hewitt, 1994). There have been studies with respect to how the Bible is used

(Thompson, 2003), teachers’ perceptions of how thoroughly they teach from a Christian perspective (Justins, 2002) and leaders’ perceptions of how the CEN vision is understood and embedded (Prior, 2017). However, no research has dealt specifically as to how teachers understand the goals of Christian schooling, and how Christianity is embedded into school culture, including within classrooms.

Methodology

This study sought to reveal teachers’ perceptions of the purpose of Christian schooling, and how they understood Christianity to be evident across the school and within classrooms. Consequently, a qualitative research design was chosen because this type of inquiry “gives voice to the participants” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 288) and has the potential to provide rich descriptions of a phenomenon. The study posed three questions:

- In your opinion, what are the goals of Christian schooling?
- Where do you think Christianity should be evident in the life of the Christian school?
- In your experience how (or when) do students encounter the Christian faith in the classroom environment?

Sample

The data for this study was collected from the larger research project on the beliefs and practices of employees of CEN member schools with respect to Christian schooling. This stage of the study was confined to teachers within five CEN schools, each with classes from Foundation to Year 12. One hundred and ninety six teachers responded to the online survey questions.

Instrument

An online survey comprised of open-ended questions was used to collect the data. Open-ended questions were chosen as they are exploratory in nature, providing participants with opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and understandings of Christian schooling in their own words (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Analysis

The data analysis was guided by the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This method allowed the collection, analysis and interpretation of data to occur concurrently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method was chosen as it aligns well with qualitative research (Boeije, 2002), and provided a means to compare the data, and allowed theory to be developed based on the participants’ perceptions rather than preconceived theory.

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Findings

Teachers' perceptions as to the goals of Christian schooling

CEN promotes education where children are inspired to understand the world through a biblical lens and follow a Christian way of living (CEN, 2019). Respondents agreed with this suggesting a Christian life or Christian discipleship was a goal of Christian schooling. Respondents noted that CEN schools offered a “safe environment to foster faith” and were “an ideal place to ask questions about God and voice doubts”. In the literature associated with CEN, it is clear that discipleship is not simply to be church attendance (Edlin, 2014) and is more comprehensive than salvation (Dickens et al., 2017). Discipleship involves being engaged in the world (Dickens, 2013; Hanscamp et al., 2019), active in service to God and their neighbour (Burggraaf, 2014). Respondents suggested the goals of Christian schooling provided opportunity to “show students that being a Christian isn’t just limited to a Sunday” and to develop “counter cultural people who will impact society”.

In order to assist students to understand how as Christian disciples they can view the world biblically, CEN has utilised a biblical worldview. Indeed, a biblical worldview is synonymous with CEN (Prior, 2017), being the primary medium for the integration of faith and learning in the classroom (Dickens, 2013). Consistent with this, teachers from across the five schools in this study related the goals of Christian schooling to a biblical perspective and worldview. Respondents remarked that teachers taught from a biblical or Christian perspective. Students were also educated to “discern other worldview perspectives inherent in curriculum” and live out of a Christian worldview. As one respondent offered:

To teach students to see the world as God’s world; to understand that He has something to say about every area of Creation including education in all of its facets: curriculum, methodology, environment, class management, discipline etc. To help students understand that all people have a worldview that directs the way they view everything in the world, including how they think and their ideas as to what the world should look like, Christians also have a worldview and this should direct and inform their lives in every aspect. (Respondent 56)

Christian parents who desired an alternative faith-based education in alignment with their own beliefs established CEN schools (Hoeksema, 1983). Respondents in this study, while noting the importance of faith, also acknowledged the centrality of delivering the Australian Curriculum. Schools equipped students for employment, further study, service within their communities, and as one teacher offered, to be “passionate stewards of God’s world.”

Previous studies, have suggested, with its emphasis on a holistic approach to education, CEN schools have not been renowned for academic achievement (Dickens, 2013; Justins, 2009). Academic standards were important to the teachers in this study. While education was to be from a Christian perspective or worldview, teachers discussed their high expectations of students, using words like “quality”, “rich”, or “excellent” within their goals for Christian schooling.

Teachers' perceptions of where Christianity should be evident in the life of the Christian school

The sovereignty of God is central to CEN schooling. It was important to the founders of CEN, providing a rationale for a whole of life approach to schooling (Justins, 2002). To this day, the CEN vision celebrates the lordship of Christ over all of life (CEN, 2019). From this, it is held that CEN schools not confine Christianity to certain elements of practice, such as chapel and prayer, but that it be evident holistically across the life of the school (Dickens, 2013; Justins, 2002). In this study, sixty percent of teachers affirmed the above, suggesting that Christianity be evident “everywhere” or in “all aspects” of school practice. As found in previous research, respondents suggested the Christian faith not be confined to religious instruction classes or chapel services, but rather be evident holistically across all elements of school life (Prior, 2018). These aspects included policies and practices, school events including assemblies, student reports, in the playground, and the carpark. In explanation:

Every day in every way possible. It should be authentic, though, not contrived or tacked on. It should inform the way we think about every part of what we do. It should be the thread that makes up the whole tapestry of a child’s education in the Christian school. (Respondent 10)

In describing where (in the school) Christianity should be evident, it was clear that teachers understood that Christianity is embodied within members of the school community. Consequently, as a respondent suggested, the Christian faith “should be obvious in the relationships, first and foremost” (Respondent 57). As to which relationships, another wrote, “in every relationship (between parent and teacher, student and teacher, teacher and teacher)” (Respondent 196). Only a few teachers commented on the importance of leaders setting an example. Instead, the emphasis was on either “teachers” or “staff” practicing the Christian faith through modelling wholesome relationships and in their communication with other members of the school community, including other staff and parents. Fewer

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than ten percent mentioned chapel or assemblies.

Consistent with the sovereignty of God over all of life, CEN has long advocated that the Christian faith must influence the classroom, including the curriculum (Justins, 2002). According to respondents teachers were to teach from a Christian perspective. Learning outcomes that affirmed a biblical worldview were to be embedded in the curriculum. As above, teachers suggested that the Christian faith was also to be evident in the interactions between teachers and students, as well as in behaviour management.

I do not feel it should be ‘forced’ into every facet of the curriculum. In my experience, this is when students start to see the process of ‘Christian schooling’ as contrived and overdone. Instead, it should be modelled through the actions and attitudes of staff, reinforced through relationships and even through discipline and conflict. Therefore, the classroom environment/culture shifts towards one that is inclusive, more critical and allows for organic conversations to take place when discussing areas of the curriculum.

(Respondent 188)

Teachers’ perceptions of how/when students encounter Christianity in the classroom

Teachers’ perceptions of how/when students encounter Christianity in the classroom were organized under five approaches. These were spontaneous integration, intentional integration, Christian practices, teacher embodiment, and student-to-student relationships.

CEN schooling has long advocated a biblical worldview approach, which has distinguished it from other Christian traditions that divide schooling into religious and non-religious education (Low, 2013). Two thirds of respondents suggested that students encounter the Christian faith through teaching from a biblical perspective or worldview. The main method was understood to be spontaneous integration or teachable moments. To teachers these moments arose incidentally, often during classroom discussions. One respondent suggested:

The most effective [teaching] is when an unplanned opportunity opens up through class discussion for the teacher to offer a sincere and personal faith perspective, showing how they themselves allow their faith to help them interpret an issue or decide on a stance or behaviour. (Respondent 113)

Respondents understood these as “powerful”, “real”, and “natural” moments that arose, predominantly, in response to discussions between students or in response to questions posed by students. In some instances, this spontaneous integration was also teacher initiated.

The spontaneous/teachable moment approach has been acknowledged as “necessary”

(MacCullough, 2016, p. 103) and “welcome” (Dickens et al., 2017, p. 55). An assumption of this approach is that a teacher has the ability to look for moments and then is able to use his/her biblical knowledge to integrate faith and learning (MacCullough, 2016). In doing so, the teacher is actually modelling to students what the school may ultimately be aiming for in students, the ability to critique culture from a biblical perspective. Having said this, the spontaneous/teachable moment has also been criticised as having the potential to be “ad hoc” and “idiosyncratic” (Dickens et al., 2017, p. 55) separating the Christian faith from an otherwise secular life (Dickens et al., 2017; Parker & Street, 2018). If a goal of Christian schooling is to encourage students to develop a biblical worldview then it is appropriate that teachers plan to embed this in the curriculum, as an element of their pedagogy.

Biblical worldview mediated practice is at the heart of CEN schooling. However, only twenty percent of teachers in this study suggested that students encounter Christianity in the classroom through a learning program with an intentionally embedded biblical perspective. Many teachers find teaching from a biblical perspective challenging (Dickens et al., 2017; Fisher, 2012). Further, previous research has suggested that biblical worldview mediated practice in CEN schools has been inconsistent (Dickens, 2013; Prior, 2017). Thus, it was unsurprising that this was the least utilized method. In teachers’ responses, it was clear that they perceived certain subjects oriented themselves to this more than others did. These included English, History, Integrated Studies, Mathematics, Psychology, and Science. Interestingly, one respondent suggested this was the role of classroom rather than specialist subject teachers.

Despite CEN advocating this approach, there have been criticisms. One criticism is that it presents a narrow, almost textbook, usage of the Bible that is more about transmitting knowledge and information than capturing the hearts of students (Cairney, 2018). Another criticism is not a critique of actual practice, but rather an implicit claim often associated with the integrated model, suggesting the assertion that it is the only true way of bringing faith and learning together (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2004).

While CEN schools advocate a whole of life approach to Christianity, certain practices such as prayer, Bible reading, class devotions, school assemblies and chapel provide opportunities for the Christian faith to be explicit (Prior, 2018). Half of the teachers in this study mentioned one or more of these practices when describing how students are exposed to Christianity in the classroom. In a few instances, teachers’ responses suggested that

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classroom prayers and/ or devotions were the main means by which Christianity was evident in the classroom. While participation in Christian practices is a normal expression of Christianity, a separation and emphasis of faith practices and programs distinct from the academic or secular parts of the curriculum is considered dualistic (Beech, 2015). For the most part, however, teachers suggested Christian practices as an element of a much broader understanding that included teacher embodiment and the integration of the Bible and the curriculum.

In addition to explicit Christian practices, teachers understood that students encounter Christianity in the classroom through the example set by teachers. As one teacher suggested, “students are quick to discern the faith of their teacher by the manner in which they interact with them” (Respondent 169). According to respondents this example or modelling included how teachers fostered a supportive classroom climate, the care and attention they paid to individual students, their expectations of students, and how they dealt with classroom conflicts. The importance of teachers modelling the Christian faith was robustly affirmed:

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I believe they understand God’s love by the way I show them I love and care for them. They get that God is patient because of my patience

Students encounter faith in the classroom environment in ways that I might not plan or assess but somehow they know that I do really love Jesus. I believe they understand God’s love by the way I show them I love and care for them. They get that God is patient because of my patience with them. Students encounter Christian faith through Christians and the Holy Spirit working in and through God’s people.

(Respondent 75)

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The significance of modelling should not be understated. There is an expectation in Christian schools for staff to model the faith (Scouller, 2012). Students often remember the impact of their teachers’ lives rather than the actual classroom content they taught (Fennema, 2014). Further, personal relationships, mentoring and role modelling have previously been understood by teachers as the most effective ways of encouraging the spiritual formation of students in Christian schools (Horan, 2017). Yet, as a means of integrating faith and learning, modelling is insufficient (Shortt, 2014). Christianity is more than personal piety. CEN schools celebrate the lordship of Christ over all of life. Within CEN schools, there is a desire for faith to impact the curriculum, and the pedagogy. While most participants coupled modelling with biblical integration, twenty-five percent did not. Should teachers understand that their piety is the main means of exposing students to the Gospel there is a risk that students will be presented with a reduced, dualistic understanding of the Christian faith.

When responding to this question, in addition to writing about themselves, a few respondents noted the importance of other students. Teachers understood that students were often exposed to the Christian faith through a variety of interactions with their classmates. These included classroom discussions, the modelling of behaviours, and when conflicts arose within the student body.

Concluding comments

This research sought to reveal CEN school teachers’ perceptions of the purpose of Christian schooling, how they understood Christianity to be evident across the school, and within classrooms.

Research participants’ understandings of the goals for Christian schooling (Research Question 1) included Christian discipleship. The Christian school was understood as a safe place where students were nurtured in the Christian faith. Respondents acknowledged that schools were places of learning and they valued academic standards. CEN has long had an emphasis on worldview as means to integrate faith and learning. Respondents’ answers suggested teachers taught from a Christian perspective and encouraged in students the inculcation of a biblical or Christian worldview.

The CEN vision affirms the lordship of Christ over all of life. In accordance with this vision, CEN has promoted a holistic approach that is beyond the employment of Christian staff, chapel services, and biblical studies (Justins, 2002). Consistent with this, a majority of respondents stated that the Christian faith should be evident holistically (Research Question 2.). Understandably, this included within classrooms, in the curriculum, which was to exhibit a biblical perspective or worldview, as well as across a variety of aspects of school life. Additionally, respondents advocated that Christianity is embodied and, as such, should be evident in the interactions between various members of the school community.

A finding of this research is that teachers perceive students to encounter the Christian faith in the classroom in a variety of ways (Research Question 3.). Generally, teachers’ perceptions suggest that students encounter the Christian faith through classroom role models. With respect to discussing the Christian faith, it would appear that, predominantly, this occurs explicitly through Christian practices, including during devotional and prayer times. Additionally, when either the students or the teacher understands there to be a genuine connection between the classroom content and Christianity. Further, while teachers’ responses suggest that students encounter a Christian worldview or perspective, it is clear that intentional worldview integration is not the default position

despite it being championed by CEN as the medium to integrate faith and learning.

In conclusion, this research has provided an opportunity to listen to the voice of teachers within a particular association of Christian schools, CEN. It has contributed to the body of knowledge on Christian schooling, particularly with respect to teachers' perceptions of the goals of Christian schooling, how the Christian faith is evident across school culture, including within classrooms. CEN has emphasized a holistic approach to Christian schooling based on the lordship of Christ over all of life. It has also promoted the importance of biblical worldview as a means of equipping students to understand the world through the lens of the Bible. This research has found that teachers understand Christian schooling in similar terms to those described by CEN, yet perceive that students are more likely to encounter Christianity in classrooms through a range of practices rather than intentional biblical worldview mediated practice. **TEACH**

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