

# Teaching and Christian worldview: The perceptions of teachers

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## Abstract

**The distinctive of Christian schooling is commonly expressed in terms of worldview. Despite the prevalence of Christian worldview language in Christian schooling, there is little research into how worldview is understood and practiced. This paper is based on teachers' perceptions of Christian worldview. Specifically, it sought to understand how teachers integrate faith and learning utilising a Christian worldview, how they assess student understanding of Christian worldview, the barriers they face, and how they believe schools can better support the practice of worldview integration. This study found that despite evidence of worldview integration, few teachers were assessing the extent to which students understood a Christian worldview. Respondents suggested schools could better support worldview integration through exemplars of practice, more opportunities to share and learn from each other, and professional learning that supports biblical literacy.**

## Introduction

Christian schooling is distinctive from other approaches to education. One of the ways this distinctiveness is expressed is through worldview language. *Worldview* is a term that “has become increasingly prevalent in Christian school education” (Schultz & Swezey, 2013, p. 227). Whether it be on a website or in a prospectus, it is not uncommon for Christian schools to suggest connection to a biblical or Christian worldview. The mission or vision statements of Christian schools, for example, often suggests “that they will focus on academic excellence *and* a Biblical worldview in their students” (Schultz & Swezey, 2013, p. 228).

This study sought to investigate Christian worldview from the vantage point of the teacher. Despite the popularity of Christian worldview language in Christian schools there is little research

into how this often poorly defined term (Dowson, 2014) is understood and fostered by teachers. An aim of this study was to gain insight into teachers' understandings of a Christian worldview, provide examples as to how they taught from, and assessed understanding of, a Christian worldview, the barriers they faced, and their perceptions as to how schools could better support their practice.

Worldview, a translation of the German *weltanschauung* (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008; Sire, 2015; Wolters, 2005), has been defined as the “comprehensive framework of one’s basic beliefs about things” (Wolters, 2005, p. 2). A worldview is “what we presuppose. It is the way of looking at life...our orientation to reality” (Ryken, 2013, p. 19). While it may be that a person can identify and articulate aspects of their worldview, a worldview can also be held unconsciously (Sire, 2015). Another way to understand worldview is through worldview questions. Questions that can expose worldview commitments include: Who am I? Where am I from? What is wrong? What is the remedy? (Walsh & Middleton, 1984). A worldview, then, concerns our basic beliefs about life, “a fundamental orientation of the heart” (Sire, 2015, p. 141).

A Christian worldview is, understandably, founded on the Christian view of reality. Central to the Christian worldview is the Trinitarian God of the Bible. God exists, and this is God’s world (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008; Naugle, 2002; Ryken, 2013). For the Christian, God is “the supreme reality at the centre of all reality” (Ryken, 2013, p. 36). One of the chief means by which we know of a Christian worldview is through the Bible which presents the story of “the way the world really is” (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 3). A Christian worldview is also “a biblically faithful worldview” (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 143). Commonly, a Christian worldview is discussed by way of categories such as creation, fall, redemption, restoration (Anderson et al., 2017) which are said to outline the acts of the biblical story.

A review of the literature on Christian schooling reveals that Christian or Biblical worldview language is used in a number of ways including in relation to core beliefs, school culture, Christian formation,

“*A worldview, then, concerns our basic beliefs about life, “a fundamental orientation of the heart.”*”

stakeholders, and in relation to teaching and learning.

Christian schools are said to be based on “fundamental different worldviews” (Boerema, 2011, p. 42) to their government school counterparts. A Christian view of reality, or Christian worldview “motivates people to sacrifice both their time and their means for the establishment of Christian schools” (Etherington, 2008, p. 132). Christian schools “reflect” (Horan, 2017, p. 62) or “foster a Christian worldview” (Christian & Beamish, 2018, p. 26) such that if a biblical worldview is not providing significance to its daily operations the school could be described as merely a “Christian adaptation of a secular school” (Murison, 2018, p. 96).

Among multiple goals, Christian schools educate, or equip, students for Christian discipleship (Van Brummelen, 2009). The development of a biblical worldview is “one of the most critical components in the discipleship process” (Finn et al., 2010, pp. 9-10), understood as “an essential component of carrying on the faith” (Schultz & Swezey, 2013, p. 228). Central to the development of a biblical worldview is the teacher. In the classroom, teachers display their worldviews through their actions, words, and attitudes (Moore, 2014). As they build relationships, set an example, and deliver learning Christian teachers are well positioned to foster a biblical worldview in students (Mooney, 2018).

The Christian school curriculum should be aligned with a biblical worldview (Edlin, 2014; Fennema, 2014; Van Brummelen, 2002). To many teachers embedding a Christian worldview into their teaching does not come easily (Ashton, 2017). To support teachers some schools have utilised biblical frameworks to connect the Christian worldview to the curriculum (Murison, 2018). While there are variants, one commonly used framework is a creation-fall-redemption-restoration worldview schema (Fennema, 2014; Thompson, 2014). Regardless of framework, the practice of integrating the Christian faith with the curriculum using worldview has been described as “the key distinctive of a truly Christian education” (MacCullough, 2016, p. 34).

### Christian Education National

This study was conducted within Christian Education National (CEN). CEN is a group of predominantly parent established and governed Christian schools that affirm “the lordship of Christ over all of life”, and “the gospel rather than cultural forces as the shaper of how we think and live” (CEN, 2021a, para. 1). CEN has long advocated the use of worldview. A worldview being understood as something that originates “in a grand story” (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 23). The worldview CEN

promotes is a “transformational Christian worldview where Jesus’ love, power, and authority inform and guide all practice and community life” (CEN, 2021a, para. 2). Consequently, CEN argues against notions of dualism where life is divided into the sacred and the secular. Instead they seek to foster a holistic, integrated approach, to Christian education where a Christian worldview shapes all aspects of school culture including within the classroom. As part of their education students are exposed to a Christian worldview across the curriculum and provided opportunities to “develop their skills to critically assess the alternative worldviews within their culture” (Parker et al., 2019, p. 29).

CEN schools have commonly used a creation-fall-redemption framework in the development of curriculum that is consistent with a Christian worldview. While this method is still promoted, it has been argued “this worldview approach to Christian perspective has been taught and practised within CEN to the extent that for some it has become ‘tired’” (Dickens, 2013, p. 249). In more recent times, CEN have introduced “threads” or biblical themes as another way to integrate faith and learning (Dickens et al., 2015).

This study is part of a larger project related to the perceptions and practices of those employed in schools associated with the CEN network of Christian schools. While it is noted that Christian worldview is not a new topic within Christian schooling, there have been few studies associated with how a Christian worldview is understood and fostered in Christian schooling. Christian and Beamish (2018) explored the perceptions of pre-service teachers as to the degree to which school practices aligned with a Christian worldview in Christian schools. In CEN Justins (2002) investigated teachers’ perceptions as to the extent they taught from a Christian perspective. No research has been located that examined how teachers understand a Christian worldview, how they embed it into their classroom practice, the barriers they face, and how, if at all, the school can better support them.

### Methodology

This study investigated teachers’ understanding of a Christian worldview, how they embedded a Christian worldview into their classroom practice, the barriers faced in teaching from a Christian worldview, and how they understood the school could better support them. Consequently, a qualitative research design was chosen because this type of inquiry “probes issues that lie beneath the surface” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 288) and has the potential to provide rich descriptions of a phenomenon. The study posed:

“*No research has been located that examined how teachers understand a Christian worldview, how they embed it into ... practice, the barriers they face, and how ... the school can better support them.*”

- What do you understand by the term “Christian worldview”?
- Give an example of a way in which you might (or have) adapted a lesson to ensure that it represents a Christian worldview
- How do you know students in your classes have understood (your teaching from) a Christian worldview?
- In your opinion, what barriers prevent Christian teachers teaching from a Christian worldview in the classroom?
- How could the College better equip staff to teach from a Christian worldview?

## Sample

The data for this study was collected from the larger research project on the perceptions of employees of member schools regarding the beliefs and practices of CEN. This stage of the study was confined to teachers within seven CEN schools, each with classes from Foundation to Year 12. These seven schools employed four hundred and forty five teachers at the time of data collection. Three hundred and ten teachers (70%) responded to the online survey questions.

## Instrument

Data was collected using an online survey comprised of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were chosen as they are exploratory in nature, providing participants with an 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 & 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 and provided a means to compare the data, and allowed theory to be developed based on the understanding of participants rather than preconceived theory.

## Findings

Teachers’ understanding of Christian worldview CEN has a heritage of “recognising the value of worldview” (Dickens et al., 2015, p 15). Worldview has been used to mediate between the Christian faith and learning, and demonstrate how the Bible is relevant to all of life (Dickens, 2014). CEN suggests that education is not neutral. All teachers have worldview ‘glasses’ that influence how they teach (Parker et al., 2019). In CEN “the Bible becomes the

lens in which students view what they are learning” (CEN, 2021b, para. 2).

A finding of this research is that respondents demonstrated an understanding of worldview and a Christian worldview similar to that espoused by CEN. In describing *worldview* one respondent suggested, “Everyone has a worldview, whether consciously or unconsciously, that underlies personal values, beliefs and reasoning for interactions and goals within life” (Respondent 18). Seventy of the three hundred and ten respondents used the word “lens” in their descriptions. A worldview, for example, was described as “the lens used to view life” (Respondent 149). Respondents also demonstrated familiarity with worldview questions such as, “Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? What has gone wrong with the world? How can it be fixed?” (Respondent 205).

When defining a Christian worldview respondents suggested it was viewing life through a certain “lens” such as a biblical or scriptural lens, the lens of Jesus, or a Christian lens. One example being:

A Christian worldview refers to understanding all things through a biblical lens. Decisions about what is truth, what our purpose is, our attitudes to the environment, in fact, every decision we make needs to be filtered through God’s Word. This requires constant re-evaluation and examination, checking that our own opinions and perspectives align with the Bible.

(Respondent 55)

Respondent answers also associated a Christian worldview with Scripture. A Christian worldview was grounded in the “grand story of the Bible” (Respondent 50), or the “overarching narrative centred in Scripture” (Respondent 179). Fifteen respondents specifically mentioned the creation-fall-redemption-restoration schema, which is commonly used in CEN schools.

## Examples of how teachers represent a Christian worldview in the classroom

CEN promote an approach where all aspects of a Christian school, including classroom practice, are to be shaped by a biblical worldview (Parker et al., 2019). Respondent answers suggested that the majority of teachers embedded a Christian worldview across the curriculum. Examples provided by respondents included the use of a creation-fall-redemption-restoration schema as well as “biblical threads”. As one respondent offered, “By weaving key biblical threads into discussion, questioning, observation, comparison using *Transformation by Design* ... I select one or two threads and put them in my planning and look for opportunities across the curriculum to weave them through” (Respondent, 68).

“How do you know students in your classes have understood (your teaching from) a Christian worldview?”

A popular theme was that of “creation”. While creation was mentioned in relation to evolution, more often than not, teachers focused on the “intricacy and design” (Respondent 99) of the created world. Similarly, in Mathematics, creation was discussed with reference to “pattern and order in our world” (Respondent 58). Another major creational theme was that of stewardship. Teachers taught students “how we are called to be good stewards of God’s creation” (Respondent 310), including “what we spend our money on” (Respondent 28). A number of teachers discussed how consumerism distorts a biblical view of life. An example being, “we discuss the sin of consumerism and lack of concern for our planet. We question why humans put personal wants (e.g. branded shoes) above the needs of the world’s poor (e.g. a living wage)” (Respondent 165).

Other themes included loving God and neighbour, community, service, seeking justice, gifts, and hospitality. With respect to hospitality a respondent offered:

In the classroom discussions we investigate why God calls us to practice hospitality, what does it look like, how is hospitality different for the Christian, how can we express hospitality in a creative manner? ...The students are given opportunities to serve the school as an expression of their thankfulness. (Respondent 251)

Not all the responses evidenced worldview integration. In a handful of examples the Christian faith was variously on display, through Christian practices such as prayer or teacher behaviours, but not worldview integration. One teacher simply did not integrate (Respondent 191).

### How teachers assess students understanding of a Christian worldview

In CEN schools, students are invited to develop a “lens that enables them to see all of life as shaped by the Bible’s big story that centres on the cross—to see the world how God sees it” (Parker, 2015, p.12). A Christian worldview approach to integration includes the curriculum planning, engaging activities within lessons, and assessment of worldview thinking (MacCullough, 2016).

Only twenty of the three hundred and four teachers who responded to this question suggested they formally assessed student understanding of worldview. One teacher assessed “in a similar way that I would assess other aspects of their learning” (Respondent, 287). Another suggested there were “criteria embedded in most assessment tasks that require students to respond to the Christian concepts or threads covered in the unit” (Respondent 2).

A majority of respondents, two hundred and seven, assessed worldview verbally, through

student questions, conversations with students, and/or class discussions. One teacher offered, “I will often engage them in discussion about these issues, so I can tell based on the response that they give. However, this is not always possible as some students are very quiet” (Respondent 260). Another assessed “through discussion. Though for some students it can actually be quite confusing, particularly those from non-church backgrounds. It is the hope that you plant the seed that may one day flourish” (Respondent 225).

Twenty four teachers suggested they did not assess worldview. To one teacher it was “something I’m still wrestling with” (Respondent 44). Another offered, “I don’t and would view myself as encouraging and ‘sowing’ or even ‘watering young plants” (Respondent 167).

Curiously, fifty-one teachers suggested that they are able to assess student understanding through monitoring the behaviour of students, including how they responded to teacher direction and engaged with their peers. As one teacher suggested, “Through classroom discussion... Ideally, through the growth of their character (i.e. behaviour - more like Christ) (Respondent 237).

While CEN suggests that “the Bible becomes the lens in which students view what they are learning” (CEN, 2021b, para. 2), it is evident that few teachers are actually assessing the degree to which students have understood a Christian or biblical worldview. Further, some teachers are confusing assessing for behaviour consistent with a Christian worldview (evidence of Christian discipleship) with an understanding (or knowledge) of a Christian worldview. Assessing student understanding of worldview is a key element of Christian worldview integration (MacCullough, 2016; White, 2017). The lack of assessment is consistent with previous research into CEN schools in which leaders expressed uncertainty as to whether students understood a biblical worldview (Prior, 2017). Simply, without assessment there is insufficient evidence as to whether students have developed an understanding of a biblical worldview.

### Teachers’ perceptions of barriers to teaching from a Christian worldview

In the literature it is evident that teachers can find it challenging to integrate faith and learning using worldview (Dickens et al., 2015; Fisher, 2012). For many teachers embedding a Christian worldview into their teaching is not a natural process (Ashton, 2017). It adds another layer that takes time (Murison, 2018). As one respondent noted,

To develop quality content and teaching at a high level in accordance with national curriculum requirements

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takes time. To then extrapolate, disseminate, evaluate and redesign that from a Christian worldview takes additional time. Time we don't often have, or are not afforded. (Respondent 303)

One hundred and thirty-three respondents mentioned workload issues, or a lack of time, as a barrier to teaching from a Christian worldview. Workload issues included administration, compliance, and reporting. The main barrier, though, was an "overloaded curriculum" (Respondent 302), particularly in senior schools.

Teachers lack 'know how' was also described as a barrier by respondents. Reasons included a lack of habitual practice, little training, and biblical literacy. Further, a high proportion of teachers in Christian schools were trained in secular institutions. It was also suggested that teachers often adopted aspects of a secular worldview, and consequently struggled to see connections between their faith and the subjects they taught (Respondent 205). Additionally, there was a lack of "good role models of Christian teachers who teach from a Christian worldview perspective" (Respondent 13).

Respondents also suggested that a diversity of views within the school community presented a barrier to teaching from a Christian worldview. As one teacher suggested, "Differences in opinion between denominational beliefs within the community" (Respondent 118). Another offered,

We need to be cautious and careful of the other church beliefs. Something that would be natural to me e.g. praying in tongues, may not be natural for others. You need to be very careful that you don't upset anyone's faith or church. (Respondent 207)

Concern about how students would respond was also a barrier. Teachers recognised classroom environments often present a "diverse range of students and levels of Christian maturity" (Respondent 264). Students "are not always Christians and are not always receptive to a Christian perspective" (Respondent 243). Fear of not being able to appropriately respond to student questions also appeared to trouble some teachers.

Nineteen respondents suggested there were no barriers to integrating faith and learning in their school.

### Teachers' suggestions as to how schools can better equip teachers to teach from a Christian worldview

Despite a history of championing worldview to mediate between faith and learning, the practice of worldview integration has been inconsistent across and within CEN schools (Dickens, 2013). While several teachers were happy with the support

provided by their school, typically teachers offered multiple suggestions as to how practice could be improved.

Given the recognition of workload as a barrier, teachers argued that schools were busy places and leaders needed to prioritise the integration of faith and learning. As one teacher noted, "a teacher's workload is very crowded. Most work after they have left the school grounds, at home for several hours. ...When something new is added, maybe think about removing something else" (Respondent 252).

Practical support was a common theme. Whether it be through the sharing of ideas, mentoring or coaching, teachers suggested there needed to be an emphasis on "modelling effective Christian teaching" (Respondent 236). Alongside of focused times to collaborate, teachers thought schools could better support them with videoed illustrations of effective Christian classroom practice or opportunities to participate in classroom observations. With respect to professional learning greater emphasis needs to be placed on improving biblical literacy. Providing support for Christian postgraduate study was also mentioned.

It was noted that improving practice was not, solely, the responsibility of the school. Teachers, themselves, need to take responsibility. As one shared, "This is a very difficult question because I feel that we as Christians have a personal responsibility to develop Christ-centred principles in our own lives" (Respondent 68). Another respondent suggested,

Personally I think it's up to the individual. The more time spent reading the Bible, praying and spending time in the presence of God the deeper the relationship will be. ... This then overflows not only into Christian teaching but into everyday relationships with staff, students and parents. (Respondent 279)

While there was emphasis on building the capacity of teachers, respondents also suggested that schools could better support practice through clearer communications. CEN schools represent "a wide variety of Christian denominations and theological persuasions. Families represent a similar variety and many have no religious affiliation at all" (Dickens, 2013, p. 142). Schools need to be clearer as to their expectations (Respondent 71). To one teacher there was a need for "clear guidance on the college position on Christian education" (Respondent 105), and affirming of effective Christian practice (Respondent 248).

Additionally, respondents suggested practice could be improved through greater "accountability" (Respondent 91). Schools needed to place more

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emphasis on classroom observations (Respondent 85), audit planning documents (Respondent 147), and conducting regular appraisals (Respondent 42).

## Concluding comments

This research was concerned with Christian worldview. Specifically, it sought to garner CEN school teachers' perspectives as to how a Christian worldview is understood, how it was embedded into classroom practice, the barriers presented when teaching from a Christian worldview, and how schools could better support Christian teachers in their integration of faith and learning.

Participants' understandings of a Christian worldview (Research Question 1) were consistent with those espoused by CEN. Respondents suggested that everyone has a worldview which whether consciously or subconsciously acts as a lens by which they encounter the world. They understood a Christian worldview needed to be consistent with the biblical story. A creation-fall-redemption-restoration framework was suggested as a helpful tool for expressing the overarching narrative of the Bible.

CEN advocates for the Bible to be the lens through which students learn. Through worldview mediated practice students engaged with the biblical concepts across the curriculum. Previous research has suggested the integration of faith and learning utilising a Christian worldview has been inconsistent (Dickens, 2013; Prior, 2017). While, for the most part, answers evidence the integration of faith across the curriculum (Research Question 2) this should not be understood as a sign of consistent integration. Respondent answers were examples rather than evidence of consistent practice.

While, for the most part, respondent examples were consistent with that espoused by CEN (Research Question 2), practice remains inconsistent.

A goal of Christian schooling is for students to be introduced to, and develop, a Christian or biblical worldview. Effective worldview integration includes curriculum development, classroom practices, and the assessment of student understanding. A finding of this research is that few teachers formally assessed student understanding of a Christian worldview (Research Question 3).

Participants in this research project suggested barriers to integrating faith and learning through worldview (Research Question 4) included a lack of time, a lack of expertise, and differing opinions in their school communities. These findings are consistent with the literature on faith and learning in the Christian higher education space (Harris, 2014).

Teachers suggested that to improve the

integration of faith and learning in CEN schools (Research Question 5) there needs to be a greater emphasis on collaborative learning, examples of practice, and a focus on biblical literacy.

In conclusion, this research has given voice to Christian teachers involved in integrating faith and learning through worldview. This research found that CEN school teachers understood a Christian worldview, were able to provide examples of how to integrate faith and learning through Christian worldview, suggested barriers to integrating faith and learning, and how worldview mediated practice could be improved through targeted collaboration. It also found that, often, teachers were not formally assessing the degree to which students understood a Christian worldview. Given that a goal of Christian schooling is for students to develop a Christian worldview it is recommended that CEN schools develop mechanisms to measure the extent to which this goal is being achieved. **TEACH**

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