

## Implementing a Biblical Vision for Education: Challenges Facing Leaders from Primary Campuses of Christian Schools in Sydney, Australia

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## Implementing a biblical vision for education: Challenges facing leaders from primary campuses of Christian schools in Sydney, Australia

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**Keywords:** Challenges, Christian school, leaders, vision

### Abstract

**This article outlines the results of a recent study that investigated the challenges that leaders from primary campuses of Christian schools in Sydney are faced with as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education, along with strategies used to overcome the challenges.**

**Competing Priorities was found to be the central challenge facing Christian school leaders as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education. Others identified include: Governance Issues, Changed Parent Expectations, Commodification of Education, Dealing with Conflicts and Human Resource Management Issues.**

**With consideration of the challenges faced by Christian school leaders, the paper highlights a number of key strategies found in the study. These could be critically effective in assisting educators to help overcome the current problem facing Christian schools, that their ideologies are being challenged due to a rise in secularism in Australia, and assist them as they implement a biblical vision for education in their school. The results were displayed diagrammatically.**

### Introduction

Australian Christian schools are functioning during a time of great tension. Research has reported the rise of secularism within them (Campbell, et al., 2009), implying that their founding ideologies and practices are being challenged and coerced to conform to a secular vision. This vision is opposed, in many ways, to the biblical vision for education from which most Christian schools were formed and established. There are many stakeholders in

Christian schools who can address this problem, however, the Christian school leader is the focus here, with specific attention to the challenges Christian school leaders face as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education.

Research into tensions that Christian leaders face is rare (Cafferky, 2007) although there was a recent study conducted in Australia which focused on challenges faced by Christian leaders in the Early Childhood Sector (Shields, 2019). It provides some parallel findings to this study. Other related research focused on the beliefs and practices of Christian school leaders (O'Harae, 2007; Prior, 2018), with vision being highlighted as important to Christian school leadership in both. These studies, along with Berber (2009) and Iselin (2010), focused their Christian school leadership research on Principals working within Christian schools. Considering that minimal research involving Christian school leaders who are not principals has been conducted, it was decided that this study would involve leaders from varied leadership levels. To narrow the focus of the study each leader who participated was based at a primary campus of a Sydney Christian school. These leaders have influence on the development of children aged approximately five to twelve years old, with primary education considered to be the stage of education that strongly affects the attitude and character of the learner for life (Nias, 2000, cited in Osborne, et al., 2000).

The following questions were used to guide this study:

1. What are the challenges primary department leaders face as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education?
2. How do primary department leaders seek to overcome these challenges in Christian schools in Sydney?

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## Vision and the Christian school leader

A school's vision is its compass. It directs its journey and determines its destination. Vision produces focus, ensures the 'main thing' remains as the main thing, and can smooth leadership successions (Harris, 2013). The Christian school leader can strive towards a well-articulated vision that is broadly shared, which will ensure that the biblical integrity of a school will be maintained (Edlin, 2014, p.98). For the purposes of this study, vision was defined as 'a mindset and or set of beliefs that directs the journey and determines the destination that a school is aiming to reach'.

Christian schools will emanate God's truth in their practice if the vision they are seeking to implement is a biblical one. Many Christian educators believe that the Bible, and particularly the Gospel message, will be at the heart of a true Christian school (Frisken, 2013; Goheen, 2004; Roy, 2008; Thompson, 2004). Biblical vision in a Christian school is not just a written statement to do with God's kingdom but is to include the outworking of the Gospel within the school, with a key component to address implementing a biblical vision for education including the Christian school leader being like Christ.

Christian School leaders are to set an example in terms of the outworking of a biblical vision since vision is one of the primary functions of leadership (O'Harae, 2007) and leaders have significant influence over others (Bush & Glover, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). For a leader to truly model the way for their staff they must first 'lead' themselves (Maxwell, 2004) and Christian leaders can turn to the Bible for counsel. Though the Bible is not a textbook about education (Van Brummelen, 2009), the core values taught within it can be considered as a guide for the Christian school leader and can be used to form a true biblical vision for education. The core biblical values include integrity, courage, humility and preparedness (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011).

Whilst guided by biblical values, the effective Christian school leader can seek to address problems associated with a more secularized influence on Australian Christian schools by identifying challenges they face and determining strategies to overcome such challenges. In identifying challenges opportunity arises for problems to be addressed (Gibbs, 2012). This study sought to provide insight into what challenges Christian school leaders are faced with as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education and how they are overcoming those challenges.

## Challenges found in the literature

In the current culture of rapid change (Duignan, 2012), where religious values are considered less important

in Australian society compared to the past (Neidhart, 2014), Christian schools are faced with challenges that interfere with the implementation of a biblical vision. These can undermine the key values and founding principles by which Christian schools began.

The digital technological revolution, which has been influenced by the globalisation of education (Buchanan, 2011), presents challenges for Christian school leaders who are being hard pushed to keep up with global ideals. In 2008 the Australian federal government, under Rudd's leadership, introduced a 'Digital Education Revolution', encouraging schools to be using and teaching with up-to-date digital technologies. Burnett and Turner (2018) explained that technologies are exponentially expanding and will impact leaders in education more than they have previously. One of the potential impacts of this on Christian school leaders is they need to invest more time and resources into technologies which may not add value to their school's core purpose, taking time away from other priorities.

There are increasing expectations on improving the quality of education globally, challenging the Christian school leader to discern if and how these fit in with moving the school forwards in terms of its biblical vision for education. Tuinamuana (2011) identified that Australian Christian school leaders are influenced by the global drive towards professional standards and accountability in education, with the introduction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers in 2011 intensifying the workload and placing more external pressure on schools. Leaders in schools have less time to lead teaching and learning due to the push to meet accountability expectations (Edwards, 2014a). Time that the Christian school leader may have previously spent helping teachers underpin their teaching and learning with a biblical worldview has been usurped and may be used by leaders to ensure their responsibilities to external authorities are met.

In Australia the concept of 'educational excellence', which is a prevalent term used in education now (Justins, 2009), has been causing Christian schools to reconsider their priorities, with market competition forcing schools towards corporitisation (Edwards, 2014a). Parents of children in Christian schools now see themselves as consumers in a competitive marketplace (Beamish & Morey, 2013). The Christian school leader needs to carefully navigate the implications of a corporatised school while outworking its biblical vision for education. 'Educational excellence' carries with it the implication of competitiveness and high academic achievement, being driven by individualistic ideologies, somewhat in contrast to the view of an interdependent community encouraged in Christian

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education (Frisken, 2013). Dickens (2006) argued that a school taking an individualistic approach, along with other problems, may consider the learning of certain students as more important than others. The Christian school leader may be challenged to maintain the biblical view that all children are made in God's image and seen as of equal importance (Frisken, 2013) whilst external ideologies promote the opposite.

Each member is to be valued in a Christian school community (Frisken, 2013) and outwork the role God has given them to build his kingdom. Due to traditional organisation structures, it may be challenging for the Christian school leader to ensure that every community member can serve in his or her role. Fowler (2004) refers to these roles as a person's 'office' and advocated the approach where a participatory system of decision-making enables members of a community to serve in their 'office', rather than the hierarchical top-down approach. The Australian Christian school leader may be going against traditional organisational structures of Western civilization, which exalt individualism and minimise community. Some resulting problems to this approach include people having less respect for one another, other moral virtues and the loss of a spiritual dimension to life (Johnston, 2008), which could flow into human resource management issues for the Christian school leader. Notably, in the Christian early childhood setting human resource management challenges were significant (Shields and Hattingh, 2022).

Aspects of the Christian school leader's role in and of itself can present challenges. Responsibilities such as formation of teacher character, discerning a biblical vision for pedagogy and implementing a biblical vision through the school curriculum, are each time consuming and challenging tasks related to implementing a biblical vision for education. Christian school leaders may find it a challenge to support their teachers as teachers learn to follow the recommended practice of integrating faith "with their teaching so that they teach from a Christian worldview" (Harvey, 2009, p. 6). The leader themselves, if not an experienced teacher, will discover that understanding what teaching Christianly looks like is difficult (Beech, 2015). In addition to this, most teachers in Christian schools have been taught in institutions where "God is seen as an intrusion" (Fyson, 2014, p. 3) so Christian school leaders will need to invest a large amount of time shaping and reforming perspectives gained by their teachers from secular institutes. Christian school leaders will need to facilitate explicit training and provide support, particularly for teachers new to Christian education, to ensure the school curriculum being offered by their school is aligned to a biblical vision for education.

Upholding a biblical vision for discipline and conflict resolution, another challenge for the Christian school leader, also needs to be given priority by the Christian school leader. Micah 6:8 and Matthew 23:23, when applied to discipline in the classroom, suggest that teachers and leaders are to be just when they discipline, to love having mercy and to walk humbly in their faith, before the Lord (Fyson, 2014), each a difficult guideline to follow, as classroom management is so multifaceted. The Christian school leader will be involved with disciplining students in their school, and at times, their staff. Shields & Hattingh (2022) explain a range of complexities to managing staff within the Christian early childhood sector that present challenges, such as philosophical differences between staff. It is also challenging for the Christian school leader since teamwork may not naturally occur. Harris (2013) explained that while people united by a common vision will ideally work well together, this is often not the reality.

With consideration of the many and varied challenges facing Australian Christian school leaders and the minimal research that has been conducted on the topic, this investigation into the challenges Christian school leaders face as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education and the strategies they implement to overcome these challenges is both timely and crucial.

## Methodology

An exploratory qualitative case study approach was taken to investigate the challenges facing Christian school leaders as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education. The researcher sought to provide an in-depth understanding of the issue, which was explored at four school sites in Sydney, Australia, making it a multi-site case study. Grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with coding strategies as outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2014), were used in this project to analyse data and generate the theory.

The researcher's belief about knowledge creation is best aligned with Smith (2011), who explained "our theories ... are developed ... by employing our best persona, substantive knowledge as participants in reality about how reality operates" (p. 294). The researcher also considers Colossians 2:3, which explains that in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found, presents a guiding perspective. It is in reliance on Christ that this research has been conducted.

A purposive sampling technique was used which allowed data to be collected from participants who were in various leadership roles (e.g. school deputies, student welfare leaders, stage coordinators) based at

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primary campuses of Christian schools within a 40km radius of the city of Sydney, Australia. The leaders were working in schools that were a part of the most recent Christian school movement that started in the 1970s and used to be or are still a part of Christian Schools Australia or Christian Education National.

The main research instrument was the interview proforma, which included several background information questions and six interview questions. Four of these related to the participants' understanding of a biblical vision for education – including, “How do you seek to implement a biblical vision as you lead in your current role?” The final two questions related specifically to the research questions that were the focus of this study, one being, “Tell me about challenges that particularly affect you as you seek to implement a biblical vision for education at your school”. The interview questions were general and intentionally open-ended, which can “encourage “unanticipated statements and stories to emerge” (Charmaz, 2014). An interview protocol was developed, which included elements recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), to ensure a consistent interview approach was followed. Handwritten notes taken during interviews were scribed onto an interview field notes document and every interview was recorded and transcribed.

Approval to complete the research was given by the Morling Human Research Ethics Education Panel (HREEP) and consent was gained from the four schools and participants who took part.

Data was collected from eight participants (two per school site) via a semi-structured face-to-face interview. The researcher sought to gain accuracy of handwritten notes taken during interviews by member checking. Participants were invited to forward to the researcher any further thoughts following the interviews and some were contacted via email to clarify particular responses given. An important validation strategy for the research project was clarification of researcher bias which can both positively and negatively influence interpretation of the results. It was valuable that the researcher for this project had extensive engagement in the field of Christian education, which can help with the learning of a culture (Creswell, 2013).

Data was analysed combining grounded theory coding techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2014). Initial coding occurred by reference to transcripts using an open coding, line-by-line approach, which is the common initial coding approach grounded theorists use (Urquhart, 2013). The intermediate stage of coding was axial coding, where initial codes were grouped into categories and sub-categories around the core issue being investigated. Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain this

process whereby “data are put together in new ways”. In the final stage of data analysis, selective coding was used, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), to further analyse the categories and sub-categories and a core category was identified. A theoretical explanation of the findings of the research were represented by a model.

## Results and discussion

### How leaders defined and seek to implement a biblical vision

Leaders articulated the main elements of a biblical vision for education to include beliefs formed from a Christian worldview, actions guided by what the Bible says about living for Christ and that the main goal of a biblical vision for education be that children learn to live for Christ. These ideas are similar to those outlined by Christian educators, such as Van Brummelen (2009), who relate a biblical vision to preparing students to be and become citizens of God's kingdom.

It was also found that every leader believed implementing a biblical vision was of high importance, with four leaders explaining that an intentional attitude was needed at every leadership level within the school in order to effectively implement the vision. Each leader identified several approaches they take to implementing a biblical vision, including living out the vision, enabling staff through avenues such as professional development, implementing intentional co-curricular activities and having empathy with school community members, especially staff. Three leaders specifically used the term ‘embodied’ to describe how the vision is to be implemented, but all leaders implied this through their responses.

For a leader to truly model the way for their staff they must first ‘lead’ themselves (Maxwell, 2004). It became clear that each leader sought to do this, keeping the Bible, and particularly the gospel message, at the heart of their school in all they do. The leaders were seeking to be like Christ.

### Challenges identified by leaders as they implement a biblical vision for education

Leaders identified several challenges they face as they seek to implement a biblical vision. These challenges were categorized through coding of responses given during the interviews. The challenges that emerged include: Governance Issues, Changed Parent Expectations, Commodification of Education, Human Resource Management Issues, Dealing with Conflicts and Competing Priorities. The most significant relationship found between these challenges is that all of them contributed to one central challenge,

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Competing Priorities. The extended work of this research found other relationships existed between these challenges as well, however, they are not described in detail here. The following are descriptions about each challenge found.

## Competing Priorities

The leaders were trying to balance too many things, felt pressure from society, and were overloaded, explaining there were too many ideas from the 'top'. They found that time to reflect on and communicate the school vision were a challenge. Leaders expressed a general feeling of being overwhelmed by responsibility, which was also found to be a main concern to Christian leaders in the early childhood setting (Shields and Hattingh, 2022). It could be said that they faced the many competing voices demanding the attention of the school leader, as outlined by Pietsch (2018): "History, policies, research, parental and student concerns, and the theological vision of the school – these are the significant voices that demand the attention of school leaders" (p. 62).

Time constraints were extensive, with one leader explaining, "... often your priorities are hijacked". It was difficult for the leaders to be focusing on biblical priorities. For some there was confusion about the nature of Christian schools. This was coupled with worry that Christian schools could not stay afloat, aligning with literature that highlighted the increasing competitive environment in Christian schooling (Edwards, 2014a). Most leaders expressed concern about their teaching staff being over worked, with some attributing this to high curriculum demands placed on schools.

## Governance Issues

This included both external and internal governance issues. External governance issues included curriculum compliance to authorities like the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) and ensuring that teachers maintained their accreditation, which demanded extensive time and energy. Tuinamuana (2011) noted that the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers has intensified the workload and placed more external pressure on schools to comply with regulations and policies. Internal issues included maintenance of the board and school cultural attachment to a biblical vision, aligning with Edwards (2014a), who found that Christian school boards are often dominated by secular thinking.

## Human Resource Management (HRM) Issues

There were difficulties for some leaders in recruiting suitably qualified Christian staff and providing

effective professional development (PD) for them. Edlin (2014) cautioned that Christian schools not intentional and consistent with PD for their staff risk marginalising their core reason for existence. Leaders in the study particularly mentioned that enabling staff to incorporate a biblical worldview into the culture of the school along with curriculum was a challenge, as many staff had not considered a biblical approach to education. Fyson (2014) explained that many teachers in Christian schools have themselves been educated in a godless environment, which has had a major impact on classrooms around the world.

## Dealing with Conflicts

Most leaders raised dealing with conflicts as a challenge. Sometimes this was associated with discipline of staff, but more often it was conflicts within the school community: between staff, between staff and parents, between staff and other school community stakeholders or between students. Harris (2013) explained that while people united by a common vision will ideally work well together, this is often not the reality. Denominational differences were highlighted to present a strain on relationships, along with staff gossip. It was explained by Reel (2015) that weariness can make it harder for the Christian school leader to uphold a biblical vision for discipline and conflict resolution, suggesting leaders may be challenged further when fatigued.

## Commodification of Education

Some leaders explained that education was being viewed more as a commodity, or a product that can be traded, compared to a valuable service that is delivered. New technologies have become an avenue by which education is commodified. This directly connected with the challenge of Changed Parent Expectations since parents were making judgements about schools from a mindset of education being a commodity. Commodification of Education is influenced by the ideologies of consumerism, economic rationalism and individualism, key components of secularism, the worldview by which Australian schools have been found to be increasingly aligning to (Campbell, et al., 2009).

Leaders also mentioned the use of technology to market schools in new and unique ways as a challenge, aligning with Burnett and Turner (2018), who highlighted an exponential expansion of technologies impacting leaders in education more than previously. The intangible nature of key qualities of Christian education were seen to be a challenge to market to parents, with one leader questioning, "We love the kids, but how do you put that on social media?" Interestingly, the findings of

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The leaders were trying to balance too many things, felt pressure from society, and were overloaded, explaining there were too many ideas from the 'top'.  
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Beamish & Morey (2013) indicated that although there was more competition between Christian schools, parents were making choices about Christian schools based on an interaction of many complex factors and cautioned Christian schools to keep this in perspective when considering how parents choose a school for their child.

## Changed Parent Expectations

Leaders were challenged by a different attitude from parents, with comparison made in some instances to parent expectations held in the founding days of Christian schooling. Some felt the partnerships were not as close as they once used to be. Pietsch (2018) and Beamish and Morey (2013) explained that increasingly in these times, there is a disconnect between the purposes of a Christian school and the desires of some parents who send their children to Christian schools. Leaders interviewed believed that some parents did not necessarily share the school's vision, but rather sent their children to a Christian school for, what one leader described as, "a good child with a good HSC result". Since values and educational achievement are two major motivations for parents choosing independent schools (an Australian Institute Survey cited in Edwards, 2014b), parents who may not share the school's vision may still be attracted to Christian schools, contributing to the misalignment of vision between parents and Christian schools. This misalignment occurs in the early childhood setting as well and contributes to the challenges for the Christian school leader of interacting with parents, as identified by Shields & Hattingh (2022).

## Strategies identified by leaders to overcome the challenges

The results related to the strategies used to overcome the challenges of implementing a biblical vision for education were coded into six categories, which will be known as strategies: Building Relationships, Christian Practices, Professional Development (PD), Opportunities for Collaboration, Reflection and Policy or Procedural Changes. Two strategies were described as effective to overcome all challenges identified, Building Relationships and Christian Practices. Other strategies were connected with overcoming specific challenges. These strategies are described below.

### Building Relationships

Sharing the biblical vision by speaking about it regularly to staff was important to leaders as a way of Building Relationships. Kouzes and Posner (2012) explained that positive communication is highly important to one of their identified five practices of

exemplary leaders, 'Inspire a Shared Vision'. A vision that is owned by many stakeholders in a school is likely to have a greater influence on all in the school community (Harris, 2013). Leaders considered that clear communication, empathy and advocacy were helpful to overcome challenges, particularly when Dealing with Conflicts and Changed Parent Expectations.

Inviting parents to be partners, as found in this study, is seen by Quaglia (2016) as an effective way for school principals to overcome the challenges to do with parents being disengaged. Listening and advocating for staff were a part of overcoming challenges as well. Two leaders explained that visual displays have also been a helpful communication tool to remind the school community about its biblical vision for education.

### Christian Practices

Christian Practices, which involved leaders modelling their relationship with God, were not only seen as fundamental to facing all challenges identified, they were also a motivation and inspiration for leaders to continue leading in their school contexts. One leader linked their life purpose as a motivating factor to persevere and overcome particular challenges, explaining "we are working for His glory and they are His skills and His gifts and His talents that He has provided us with for that purpose". Prayer, devotions, trusting that God is in control, submitting to God, praising God, meditating on the Bible and speaking the Word were some of the Christian Practice strategies named by leaders.

The concept of the leader being the person that they want others to become aligns to general and Christian leadership ideas. Kouzes and Posner (2012) describe 'Model the Way' as another of their five practices of exemplary leaders. For a leader to truly 'Model the Way' for their staff they must first 'lead' themselves (Maxwell, 2004). Gunderson (2006) describes modelling as something that Christian leaders should eat, sleep, breathe and think. Further, Ledbetter, Banks and Greenhalgh (2016) suggest that it would be dangerous for the church and the world if Christian leaders did not follow Jesus, the Son of God.

### Policy or Procedural Changes

Policy or Procedural changes were mostly referred to as a strategy to overcome Changed Parent Expectations. Schools already had enrolment policies in place to suit their context, which would help to set realistic parental expectations about the biblical vision of their schools. These included parents signing agreements at enrolment about the school's biblical teachings. One participant shared

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*increasingly in these times, there is a disconnect between the purposes of a Christian school and the desires of some parents who send their children to Christian schools.*”

about a uniform variation policy developed that was associated with uniform requirements for students with religious beliefs outside of the Christian faith. There was also mention of recruitment policies that allowed for better screening of applicants.

Although leaders usually linked this strategy to overcome Changed Parent Expectations, it is clear from the literature that policies and procedures also benefit other stakeholders in the Christian school setting and would assist in maintaining a biblical vision for education. Policy and procedural changes may allow for a context to be created whereby school community members could implement the school's vision, as was suggested by Van Brummelen (2009) to be the key reason why school policies exist. Collins and Porras (2004) similarly explain that the core ideology of a school can be preserved through organisation and strategic alignment, which can be seen in a school's policies and procedures.

## Reflection

Reflection is an essential practice for educational leaders (Whitaker, 1995), and when combined with prayer and meditation, was considered by leaders to be a particularly helpful strategy when Dealing with Conflicts and HRM Issues. These strategies enabled leaders to carefully consider the best courses of action in Dealing with Conflicts or HRM Issues and allowed them time to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the decision-making process.

Allocating time for leaders to self-reflect and providing opportunities for staff to reflect helped leaders to overcome the challenge of Competing Priorities since it gave them opportunity to remind themselves or each other what a biblical vision for education is, re-establish correct priorities and put strategies in place to ensure maintenance of a biblical vision for education.

Something worth noting about reflection explained by Atkins (as cited in Pietsch, 2018), was that there are benefits when school leaders take time to reflect upon fulfilling government requirements while still maintaining practices consistent with their attitudes, values and beliefs about learning. This is the kind of reflection one of the leaders described in order to overcome the HRM Issue of implementing a biblical vision through the school curriculum. He explained, "to question and reflect and challenge what they are teaching ... this is the real challenge - to get off the merry-go-round and stop and ask - is this it?"

## Opportunities for Collaboration

Facilitating Opportunities for Collaboration between leaders and teachers was a key strategy to overcoming HRM Issues, particularly in relation

to dealing with staff management and being able to professionally develop teachers who do not understand how to design curriculum with a biblical framework. Leaders suggested meetings that enabled the sharing of materials and resources, and a PD framework that allowed for collaboration. Glantz (2006) highlighted the importance of PD being a collaborative task. In addition, schools that perform best tend to extend decision-making and responsibilities to their community (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012). This includes organisational structure alike to what Fowler (2004) described where a participatory system of decision-making is allowed, giving community members the opportunity to serve in their 'office', as explained previously.

Leaders suggested that asking for advice from outsiders as well as those within the school for feedback were opportunities for collaboration that assisted with Governance and HRM Issues. Engaging consultants to assist with challenges, such as compliance to authorities, was a strategy mentioned. Leadership mentors were important to some leaders, both from within and outside of their schools. These mentors gave encouragement to leaders, provided alternative perspectives to situations and assisted in problem solving challenges the leader faced.

## Professional Development

Most leaders mentioned Professional Development (PD) about biblical concepts and how to incorporate a biblical perspective into the curriculum as a strategy that helped to overcome the challenge of staff not being equipped, a HRM Issue. This aligns to Edlin's (2014) assertion that claimed PD as a key strategy to maintain the biblically focused vision within a Christian school.

Leaders saw staff development weeks as important opportunities to share and upskill staff about a biblical vision for education. This is one component of equipping teachers to teach in their schools, seen as something effective principals realise (Dinham et al., 2018). The leaders of this study appeared to understand the positive implications of upskilling teachers in terms of implementation of a biblical vision for education, contributing many ideas in this regard. Some leaders floated the idea of a mandated certification course about Christian education, with it being implemented already at one of the schools visited. One on one mentoring of teachers was also seen to be effective; the participant described the process to include her sitting with teachers and helping them write lessons for programs. This was an effective strategy to ensure the school's biblical vision was implemented through pedagogy and its curriculum.

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## Conclusion

The study sought to address a problem impacting upon many stakeholders within Christian schools, that is, the founding (biblical) ideologies of Australian Christian schools are being increasingly stretched by conflicting external factors. This problem appears, in some ways, to relate to the rise of secularism in Australian schools. Christian school leaders find themselves in a time of great tension, facing several and varied challenges to reconcile a vision, that is in many ways, opposed to the biblical vision for education they seek to implement in their Christian school. The two questions used to focus this study were ‘What are the challenges primary department leaders face as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education?’ and ‘How do primary department leaders seek to overcome these challenges in Christian schools in Sydney?’

Figures 1 and 2 were developed in direct response to these questions, providing answers in a succinct visual form. They represent the challenges primary department leaders face and strategies used by leaders as they seek to overcome these challenges. Icons have been used to represent each challenge and four of the six strategies. The other two strategies are represented by the formation of a circle.

In Figure 1, the icon of a person in the centre represents a Christian school leader who is overwhelmed by the central challenge found when implementing a biblical vision for education, Competing Priorities. Surrounding the leader are icons to represent the five other challenges found in this study, each of which contributed to the central challenge. The arrows indicate that each of these



Figure 1. *The Overwhelmed Christian School Leader: Challenges facing the Christian school leader who seeks to implement a biblical vision for education*

challenges contributes to the Christian school leader being overwhelmed by Competing Priorities.

In Figure 2, which visually displays strategies implemented to overcome the challenges, the Christian school leader has a changed persona and surrounding him or her are the strategies used to overcome challenges identified. This leader is considered strategic. The strategies, written and represented by icons in most instances, are connected to the particular challenge/s they were found to assist in overcoming, by them being overlaid and or overlapping on those challenge/s. Building Relationships and Christian Practices are strategies that surround all the challenges, represented by the circle, since they were identified in this study as being used to overcome all challenges. The arrows indicate that each strategy contributes to the person in the centre overcoming the challenges they face as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education.

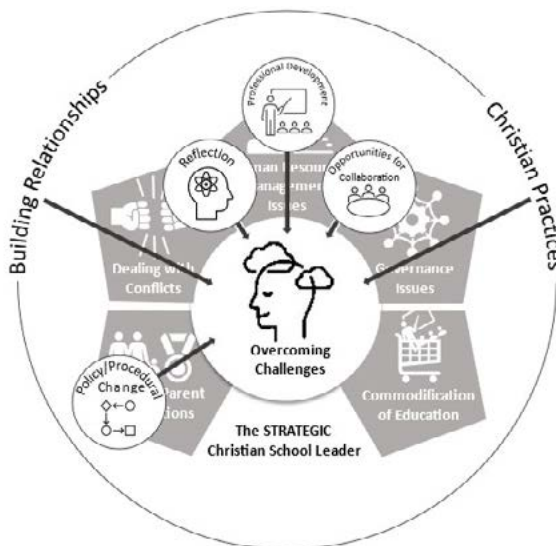


Figure 2. *The Strategic Christian School Leader: Strategies used by the Christian school leader who seeks to overcome challenges they face when implementing a biblical vision for education*

## Recommendations

The dissemination of information from this study to Christian school leaders may be a source of encouragement and motivation for them to continue in their role. This could be achieved in PD settings or by simply providing this article to leaders. Ideas that could be of benefit include the strategies used by Christian school leaders to overcome challenges such as the importance of Building Relationships with members of their school community and colleagues in their team, exercising clear communication and having empathy and advocating for them when needed. Along with

“dissemination of information from this study to Christian school leaders may be a source of encouragement and motivation for them to continue in their role”

this, implementing Christian Practices, individually and with their team, such as prayer, devotions, the reading of the Bible and reminding their school community that the Bible teaches that God is in control are also strategies that can be highlighted to leaders.

It is recommended that Christian PD organisations provide training for leaders in Christian schools that address the challenges leaders may face as outlined above and suggested strategies for leaders to overcome these challenges. Sessions in relation to curriculum design and programming may be particularly valid, since there appears to be a great need for this within the four Christian schools in this study, which could be symptomatic of other Christian schools. When conducting training for leaders and teachers in Christian schools, trainers should consider the mode of delivery to include opportunities for collaboration, Christian practices and time for reflection.

In courses designed for Christian school leaders in tertiary institutes, it is recommended they ensure time is allocated for learning about the challenges leaders may face as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education and strategies that can be used to overcome these challenges.

Relevant future studies could include a longitudinal study of leaders in Christian schools, both new and experienced, from primary and high school departments, identifying challenges unique to different levels and stages of leadership, times of the year and locations of Sydney. They could also narrow in on the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon Christian school leaders and the way leaders have dealt with them.

It is clear from this study that leaders from primary campuses of Christian schools face several and varied challenges as they seek to implement a biblical vision for education while they lead. Leaders overcome these challenges using various strategies that, if shared with the broader Christian school community, will enable them to be better aware of ways they could overcome these challenges. Gibbs (2012) reminds Christians in ministry it is important that they draw close to each other, working in unity to overcome challenges. **TEACH**

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This research was conducted as a part of the M.Education (Leadership) at Morling College (graduated in March 2021).



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