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TEACHJOURNAL

OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION



BEYOND SERVICE PROJECTS:
Cultivating a Culture of Service at School

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The journal invites and welcomes articles, papers, and materials that relate to its mission and vision statements. For further information, and notes for contributors, visit *TEACH* at **research.avondale.edu.au/teach/**

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Village Yard Christian School students.

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CONTENTS

3 Editorial

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

4 Beyond Service Projects: Cultivating a Culture of Service at School
Heidi Mazz, Emily Littlewood, Gail Ormsby

14 The Increasing Need for Innovation in Schools
Jeff Davis

EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

20 From Words to Practice: Teaching Staff Perspectives on Their School's Mission and Vision
Nick Dunstan, Michelle Ralston, Daryl Murdoch

TEACHING & PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

32 The impact of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation on the wellbeing of secondary teachers in a Christian school context
Trent Martin

44 Unpacking the influences on teacher wellbeing in a faith-based school system
Bree Hills

REFLECTIONS, IMPRESSIONS & EXPERIENCES

50 Reframing Mission in Christian Schools: Philosophical and Educational Implications from Japan
Akihiro Ito

58 Christian pedagogical praxis: from head to heart to hand: Hearing afresh what the Biblical Scriptures require in a contemporary application of instructional principles
Fraser Douglas Hannam

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EDITORIAL

Peter Kilgour

Nelson Mandela made the famous statement that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (Mandela, 1990). This remains true for all education in all its forms in 2026 but even more so for Christian Education. The education of young people combined with using the words of Jesus as our framework provides a powerful mechanism for changing the world one person at a time.

In the secular world Chesbrough and Di Minin (2014) pointed out that organisations and education policies, among other contributors, have not been seen to be hugely significant to society in the past, but the growing awareness of consequences and innovations stemming from these areas have brought about an increased awareness. What an opportunity Christian schools have to insert Christian philosophy and the stories of Jesus into teaching students the way society should work.

In a world that is increasingly valuing social justice, Christian schools should continually reflect Jesus. He focused on justice and went about rescuing people with spiritual and physical needs, while encouraging others to do the same. Luke 4 makes it very clear that Jesus lead by example in caring for the poor, the blind, the oppressed. What a legacy this is the share with our students.

At TEACH we would love to hear from teachers and leaders at Christian schools in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, and across the world. We would love you to report to us in narrative style what you are doing in your schools or classrooms to advance the work of Christian education. This could be in learning innovations, student or teacher wellbeing, mission expeditions, school community engagement, or other areas of interest where you would like the work of your school to be featured.

We have had requests to balance our strongly academic articles with general interest stories or reports from the front lines of Christian schools. As such you will notice in this edition, we have included a new section called 'Focus on Schools'. These contributions will not be peer reviewed but will be articles of interest that teachers can read in their breaks when they pick up TEACH from their staffroom coffee table. Having said that we will continue to be one of the few Christian education journals available that provide strong academic peer reviewed papers in the areas of Education Administration, Teaching and Professional Practice, and Research and Scholarship.

In this issue we have contributions from two Queensland Christian schools in the new 'Focus on Schools' section. They are addressing the need for innovation in schools and creating a culture of service in schools. To complement these, we have academic contributions on school vision and mission, teacher wellbeing, and Christian pedagogy. You will also find a fascinating follow-up to a previously published article on mission in Christian schools in Japan postwar.

If you have stories of where you have been blessed as a teacher in a Christian school and would like to be published in this journal, email me at teach.editor@avondale.edu.au. You can send your submission to me or just write and ask a question. Submission guidelines for the journal can be found at https://tinyurl.com/avondale-teach-guidelines. TEACH

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> *In a world that is increasingly valuing social justice, Christian schools should continually reflect Jesus.*



Hillcrest Christian College middle school teacher and students learning in a repurposed car park.

Beyond Service Projects: Cultivating a Culture of Service at School

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Keywords: Youth identity, school culture, service learning, character formation

Abstract

Changing societal mores and values are impacting students. This dilemma poses a challenge for Christian schools as they support students in developing an authentic and enduring faith that continues beyond graduation. Our journey as a school was intentional about enabling students to 'look' beyond themselves and consider the needs of others. Utilising a mixed-method action research approach, the staff and students participated in an intentional process to re-visit their mission and purpose. Such a cultural shift takes staff, students and school community on a shared journey of discovering what Scripture teaches about service, examining the example of Jesus and learning to put these principles into practice. Results show that student wellbeing improved between 2023 (58.3%) and 2025 (63.3%). Our aim is not simply to improve school culture or increase participation in service activities. It is to teach, model and equip students to live lives characterised by faithful, compassionate and purposeful service—within school and throughout adulthood.

> *Changing societal mores and values are impacting student behaviour and their identity.*

Societal challenges for young people

Changing societal mores and values are impacting student behaviour and their identity. There is growing interest in understanding how moral concepts and values inform behavioural practice (Klimstra et. al. (2010). Early research by Ruther and Smith (1995) determined that society was shifting "towards individualistic values, the increasing emphasis on self-realisation and fulfilment, and the consequent rise of expectations" (p. 807). Klimstra et. al. (2010) reporting on a five-wave longitudinal study of 923 early to middle adolescents (12-20 years), on change and stability for identity formation, concluded that: "adolescent identify formation is guided by progressive changes in the way adolescents deal with commitments, rather than by changes in the commitments themselves" (p. 150). Twenge and Campbell (2009) maintain that an underlying societal challenge is the increased "self-centredness of young people; the apparent over-feeding of self". Brooks (2015) focuses on a similar sentiment. The historical shift away from moral realism has resulted in: "the self-esteem movement…Our modern conversation lives in this romantic vision" (p.247). Further, Eckersley (2001, p. 48) argues there is linkage between culture and young people's wellbeing:

> In my own writing on psychosocial problems among young people, I also have focused on their possible cultural sources, including rising individualism, and young people's particular vulnerability to the failure of modern Western culture to do well what cultures are supposed to do: provide webs of meaning that shape the way people see the world, locate themselves within it, and behave in it (Eckersley, 2001, p. 48)

Eckersley reiterates further:

> These changes have made it harder for young people to feel accepted, loved and secure; to know who they are, where they belong, what they want from life, and what is expected of them (Eckersley, 2008, p. 24).

Crocetti's (2017) paper on adolescence identity formation, highlights the ongoing need to enable an environment that fosters a dynamic formation:

> The biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur in adolescence stimulate young people to think about themselves, reflect on the kind of people they want to become, and find their place in society (p. 3).

Given this trending cultural dynamic, Hunter (2000) challenges educators to consider how 'character development' is nurtured and directed toward "self-referencing and oriented toward the end of personal well-being" (p. 147).

A significant challenge facing Christian schools is how to support students in developing an authentic and enduring faith that continues beyond graduation. Christian education should seek to do more than communicate biblical knowledge or provide occasional opportunities for community service. It should invite students into a way of life in which faith is expressed through relationships, character, vocation and service. This article proposes that the intentional development of a culture of service may contribute to this goal.

Methodology

In actioning the development of our DDAC organisational culture, we utilised a mixed-method action research process that involved a hands-on method used to study and solve real-world problems (Checkland, 1981; Robson, 2024). The process relies on repeating cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The process is participative, relies heavily on qualitative processes but can include quantitative analysis. A critical step is critical reflection on the processes and the outcomes to facilitate change, and as Kurt Lewin (1946) argued it is necessary for people to accept the need for change before they can make changes.

During the period from 2022 to 2026, DDAC leadership launched on a deliberate journey seeking to improve its organisational culture. Staff, students and the wider school community participated in structured processes such as staff planning sessions, workshops, working groups, service focus-themed chapels, coaching and evaluations. During this period, many school documents were also reviewed, rewritten or developed.

As part of the Quality Adventist Schools Framework (Insight SRC Pty. Ltd., Melbourne), using two School Improvement Surveys, quantitative data were collected from staff, students, and parents to assess the attitude and behaviour of students within the school context. Data were analysed by Insight SRC and the summary of the results were released to the DDAC principal.

> *". . .our aim was not simply to improve school culture"*



Image: Darling Downs student leaders



Image: Darling Downs agriculture students

Measuring school effectiveness is challenging. School effectiveness has recently been determined to be influenced by student relationship, engagement in learning, teacher relationships and emotional wellbeing (Sutherland, Hart, Oski and Tan, 2014). Thus, measuring change in these constructs, is argued to be more informative for school leadership. Here we compared changes between 2023 and 2025 focusing on the outcome Student Wellbeing as an indicator of school effectiveness. The construct Student Wellbeing is calculated using the following indicators of the Student Survey: 1) emotional wellbeing (student morale, student distress, connectedness to school); 2) teacher relationships (teacher empathy, purposeful teaching, stimulating learning); and 3) Engagement in learning (learning confidence, student motivation, connectedness to peers).

> *When identity is secure, service need not become an attempt to earn acceptance*

Developing a Biblical-based framework for Christian school's cultural development

At DDAC our aim was not simply to improve school culture or increase participation in service activities. Rather, it is to teach, model and equip students to live lives characterised by faithful, compassionate and purposeful service—within school and throughout adulthood. We are admonished to: "train up a child in the way they should go" (Proverbs 22:6). Similarly, Ellen White (2002) advocated that:

> True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being…It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come (p, 13).

Our primary goal was to revisit the Scripture to see what it teaches about service, examining the example of Jesus and learning how to put these principles into practice. We determined that service should not be presented as an isolated program, event or compulsory activity. Instead, it can become an expression of the school's Christian identity and mission. When service is grounded in a relationship with God, connected to the life of the church and embedded in everyday school practices, it may help students integrate faith with life.

A Biblical framework for service learning and practice

We pose that there are five key theological principles or pillars that promote service learning: 1) identity in Christ precedes service, 2) relationship with God, 3) partnership with God, 4) dependence upon God in human weakness and 5) participation in God's purposes (Figure 1).

1) Identity in Christ precedes service

Human beings have a deep need to understand who they are and why their lives matter. Secular scholars refer to this process as identity formation. Within a Christian worldview, identity and purpose are received from God rather than constructed solely through achievement, recognition or social status. This understanding is foundational to a healthy culture of service.

Ephesians 2:10 describes believers as God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. This places identity before activity: people are not valued because of what they accomplish for God; rather, their service flows from who they are in Christ. Scripture also presents human beings as intentionally formed and known by God (Psalm 139:13–16) and as people brought into the kingdom of the Son Jesus (Colossians 1:13).

When identity is secure, service need not become an attempt to earn acceptance, demonstrate spirituality or gain recognition. Instead, it can emerge as a grateful response to grace. A service culture in an Adventist school should therefore help students understand their God-given worth before asking them to serve others. This requires schools to communicate consistently that every student is known, valued and capable of contributing to the wellbeing of others.

2) Relationship with God forms the foundation

Christian service begins in relationship with God. God created human beings for a relationship that involves prayer, listening, worship, reflection and responsive obedience. Through this relationship, believers grow in wisdom, maturity and an understanding of God's character. The ministry of Jesus demonstrates the importance of this foundation. Jesus regularly withdrew to pray (Luke 5:16), prayed before choosing the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12–13) and sought the Father in Gethsemane before the cross (Luke 22:39–46). His actions emerged from an abiding relationship with the Father rather than from activity alone.

Consequently, an Adventist school cannot create a sustainable Christian service culture merely by increasing the number of service projects it offers. Students and staff also need opportunities to know God, reflect on Scripture, listen prayerfully and consider how God may be inviting them to respond. Service then becomes an expression of God's character rather than simply the completion of a task.

3) Service is partnership with God

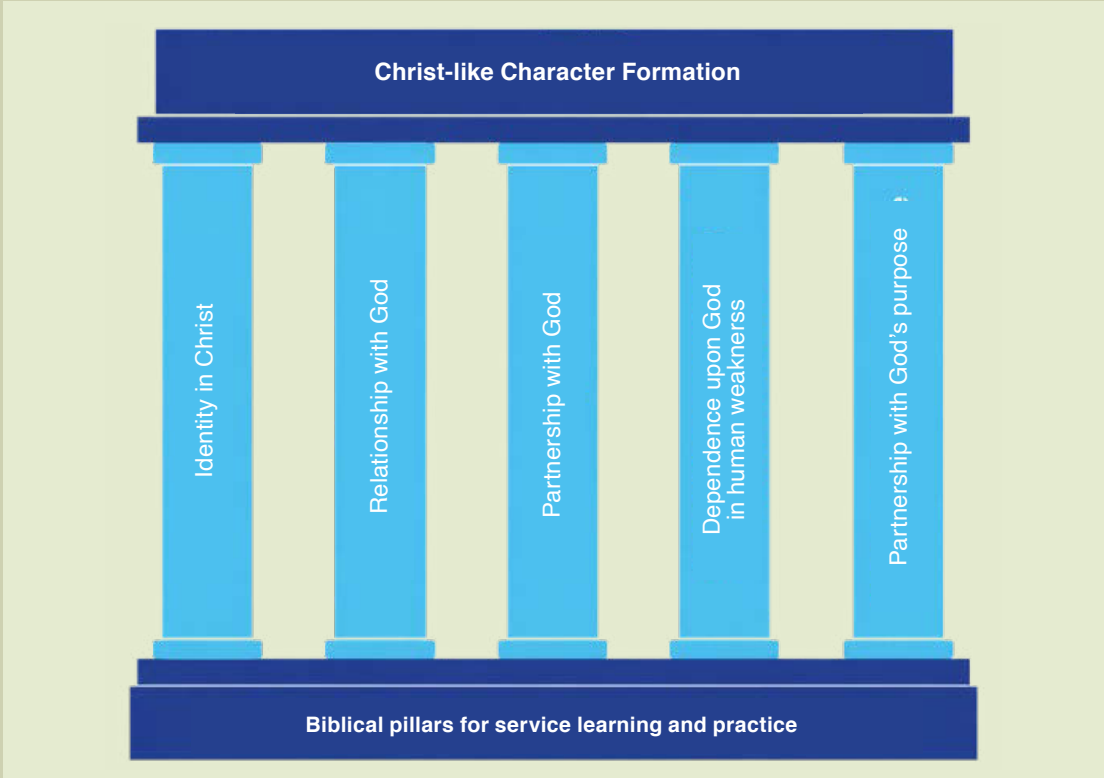
Christian service is more appropriately understood as working with God than merely working for God. Jesus' invitation to abide in Him conveys an ongoing relationship of dependence: lasting fruitfulness grows from connection with Christ (John 15:4–5). Paul similarly describes believers as co-workers in God's service (1 Corinthians 3:9).

This perspective changes the motivation for service. Ministry is not primarily a human attempt to achieve something impressive for God. It is participation in what God is already doing in people, communities and creation. This does not mean that service will never be demanding or tiring. Rather, it means that the source, direction and purpose of service are found in God instead of personal ambition or institutional pressure.

Within a school culture, students can be taught to ask reflective questions such as: What might God be doing in this situation? What does this person need? How would Jesus respond? What gifts and resources have we been given? Such questions encourage service that is prayerful,

> *Walking in God's purposes can give students a compelling understanding of vocation and responsibility.*

Figure 1: *A Biblical Framework for service learning and practice within Christian schools*



relational and responsive rather than merely program driven.

4) Human weakness creates space for dependence

Christian service does not require people to be flawless, completely confident or self-sufficient. Scripture describes human beings as fragile "jars of clay" through whom God's power can be revealed (2 Corinthians 4:7–9). Paul also discovered that God's grace was sufficient within his weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9–10). This understanding is particularly important for students who may believe that only the most talented, confident or successful people can make a meaningful contribution. A healthy service culture teaches that limitations do not remove a person's capacity to serve. They can instead encourage dependence upon God, collaboration with others, humility and openness to support.

Schools should take care not to romanticise weakness or suffering. Students need to learn both that God can work through human limitations and that seeking assistance is a sign of wisdom rather than failure. Service is therefore undertaken as the body of Christ, with people contributing different gifts and supporting one another.

> *". . .we were growing so quickly that it felt increasingly difficult to maintain the culture of the school."*



Image: Darling Downs agriculture students

5) God's purposes give service direction

Walking in God's purposes can give students a compelling understanding of vocation and responsibility. Scripture presents individuals as intentionally created, differently gifted and invited to participate in God's work (Romans 12:4–8; Ephesians 2:10). Purpose is therefore broader than choosing a career or achieving personal success. It involves discerning how one's character, relationships, opportunities and abilities may contribute to the flourishing of others and the mission of God.

Adventist schools can help students develop this understanding by providing opportunities to identify their gifts, listen to the experiences of others, respond to genuine community needs and reflect on what they learn through service. Students should not be positioned merely as helpers who possess resources for those who do not. They should learn to serve with humility, recognising the dignity, knowledge and agency of the people and communities with whom they engage.

This approach invites staff, students, families, churches and community organisations to work together. Service becomes reciprocal and relational: participants give, receive, learn and grow alongside one another.

Accepting this Scriptural stance results in three main outcomes of the individual's character formation. As teachers, we have the duty to offer students the opportunity to explore their beliefs and deepen their understanding of God's love in action. Firstly, such an education is restorative. By beholding we become changed (2 Corinthians 3:18). By seeking to know God, begins a change in character formation. It strengthens one's self identify. Teachers and students alike are accepted as sons and daughters of Christ (Galatians 4:4-7). Secondly, character formation is education's highest aim. Ellen White (2002) emphasises the importance directing youth to utilise "the high and noble powers of the mind" (p. 15), as "Christ is the fountain of all knowledge (p. 450). Lastly, service is the natural expression of a Christ-centred life as illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan where Jesus said: "He showed mercy on him. Go and do thou likewise." (Luke 10:37).

Rebranding as a catalyst for reflection and change

In early 2022, our Seventh-day Adventist Schools (South Qld) Ltd Board of Directors initiated a rebranding process that involved incorporating "Adventist" into the school's name, aligning with the broader identity and branding of Adventist education. While the change was primarily

administrative, it prompted a deeper question: *What does it mean to be a distinctively Adventist school in our context?*

To explore this question, staff engaged in a collaborative reading of Ellen White's *Education* (2002). Revisiting the foundational philosophy of Adventist education provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on the purpose and mission of our school. At the same time, our community was experiencing rapid population growth, resulting in significant increases in enrolment and the continual addition of new classes and programs.

Amid this growth, a recurring concern emerged among staff; we were growing so quickly that it felt increasingly difficult to maintain the culture of the school. However, as we examined this concern more closely, we recognised a significant challenge. While many staff members spoke about preserving the school's culture, there was no shared language to clearly articulate what that culture was. The inability to define our culture made it difficult to intentionally nurture it or help new students and staff members become part of it.

Articulating Culture: The Heart of DDAC

In response, we embarked on a collaborative process to identify and articulate the values that shaped our community. This process resulted in what became known as **The Heart of DDAC**, a set of cultural statements grounded in three core values: **Active Kindness, Cheerful Effort, and Humble Service**.

These values were expressed through a series of statements that described the behaviours and dispositions we sought to cultivate:

- We love and respect God.
- We are welcoming.
- We dream big and focus on our goals.
- We care enough to act.
- We act with integrity.
- We take pride in belonging to our community.

Developing these statements enabled us to move beyond implicit assumptions about school culture and toward a more intentional approach. The Heart of DDAC became a framework for articulating who we were as a school and for explicitly teaching these values to students.

However, this process generated a further question. If these values genuinely defined us, how did they shape our practice in ways that

> *A significant turning point occurred when staff members themselves became participants in service-learning experiences.*

Table 1: *Comparison of student engagement indicators and wellbeing*

Categories	2023	2025
Overall Adventist school Identity and student experience	n=163	n=133
	%	%
Personal faith engagement	75	87
Personal faith development	81	86
Local church engagement	78	71
Treatment of others	70	89
Inclusiveness	73	90
Service engagement	14	78
Student Christ-like behaviour	9	56
Understanding service	62	82
Understanding social justice	30	64
Service to others	38	73
Student morale	51	56
Overall Student Wellbeing	**58.83**	**63.3**



Image: Darling Downs agriculture students

> *. . . positive changes were observed in personal faith engagement and development, but also outward looking acts*

distinguished us from other schools? For example, if *Active Kindness* was truly a core value, what evidence existed to demonstrate its influence on school life? More broadly, how did our commitment to *Humble Service* transform the educational experiences we offered students?

Moving from Values to Practice

This question became the catalyst for a deeper exploration of service. Over several years, we intentionally focused on the value of *Humble Service*, seeking to understand what it might look like if service became more than an occasional activity and instead developed into a defining characteristic of school culture.

Recognising that values are reflected in the allocation of resources, we made deliberate structural changes. Time was set aside within the curriculum for service activities, secondary students were required to complete service hours each year, and existing camps and programs were reviewed through the lens of service. Our long-term aspiration was ambitious: that every student would freely choose to engage in a meaningful service experience, including opportunities for overseas service.

As our commitment to service developed, we began investigating service-learning frameworks and the concept of service culture. At that stage, we had no formal framework guiding our work. Many of our decisions were based on intuition, professional judgement, and a desire to align practice with our values. In retrospect, some of these decisions proved to be significant foundations for what followed.

Learning from service

A particularly influential development was the opportunity to connect with Jerry Unser, often affectionately referred to as the "grandfather of STORM Co." and Carol-Joy Patrick, a leading academic in Service-learning. Their thinking reinforced many of the questions we were already exploring, and we joined forces. While our students had participated in service projects and service trips for some time, we increasingly sensed that authentic service involved more than completing worthwhile activities that helped others.

A significant turning point occurred when staff members themselves became participants in service-learning experiences. One such experience involved staff working together to support the operation of a community soup kitchen. These experiences challenged some of our assumptions about service and prompted reflection on the distinction between performing acts of service and

cultivating a disposition of service.

While individual acts of kindness remained important, we began to recognise that they did not fully capture our understanding of **Humble Service**. We were searching for something deeper—an approach grounded in a biblical understanding of service as a way of life rather than an isolated event.

Developing a Service Culture

This led us to explore the concept of a service culture and the role service-learning could play in fostering it. Rather than viewing service primarily as something people *do*, we began to see it as something people *become*—or a life they choose to live. Service was increasingly understood as participation in relationships and communities. It involved entering the stories of others and allowing them to become part of our own stories. In this relational framework, service emerged not as an obligation or project but as the natural outcome of genuine connection and shared humanity.

As these ideas developed, we returned to the drawing board and began envisioning a Service-learning curriculum designed to support the growth of a school-wide culture of service. The curriculum was conceived not simply as a sequence of activities but as a framework for forming students who understood service as an expression of character, faith, and belonging.

Staff formation and organisational culture

This journey also transformed the way we thought about staff development. Rather than viewing spiritual development as separate from organisational culture, we began to recognise the two as deeply interconnected. At DDAC, staff commitment to working collaboratively through challenges has consistently demonstrated the impact of a shared sense of purpose and faith.

Staff worship also became more intentional and aligned with our emerging understanding of culture and identity. Worship programs focused on our collective calling as Christian educators, and staff small groups were introduced to foster deeper connection, reflection, and spiritual growth. We also established a staff choir as a means of building community and shared purpose. Recognising the importance of inclusive participation, support staff schedules were adjusted to enable attendance within their normal working hours. These initiatives reflected our growing conviction that spiritual formation and organisational culture are deeply interconnected and that a flourishing school culture begins with the development of its staff.

Over time, our core values became more than aspirational statements. They increasingly served as a framework for decision-making, shaping priorities, influencing practice, and guiding strategic direction. As this alignment strengthened, we observed a greater sense of coherence across the school. Programs, initiatives, and relationships increasingly reflected the values we professed.

Changes and results

The Insight SRC Adventist Quality Assessment Tool enables schools to see how the school culture is changing over time. Core elements that have been shown to influence school effectiveness include: not only academic achievement but also student relationships, engagement in learning, teacher relationships, and emotional wellbeing. Table 1 shows the comparison of student engagement indicators and wellbeing between 2023 and 2025. Overall, positive changes were observed in personal faith engagement and development, but also outward looking acts: inclusiveness and service to others. Reported student wellbeing changed from 58.83% to 63.3% over the two years.

> *A sustainable school culture of service begins with identity in Christ*

Teachers have noticed some changes in their classes as illustrated by this quote:

> Year 4 have been reflecting on what the Bible says about service then findings ways to live it out. When we have guests in our room or even regular staff, we are in the habit of asking them questions. We stop and talk to people. Students are learning to acknowledge people and ask if they need help. Students are starting to look at how they can help. One child who did not look up and speak, now goes up and asks people their name and greets them by their name. The students understand we are working with God to establish His Kingdom wherever we go. These are the good works we have been made for.

While these may be small measure of change, it illustrates that deliberate teacher engagement can guide student's emotional and spiritual development.

Discussion

The research process utilised an action-oriented approach that addressed identified issues in a real-world setting of Christian schools (Robson, 2024). These preliminary results revealed that it is possible to measure change in student's understanding of service and their reported wellbeing. Revans (1998) argues that "there can be no action without learning, and no learning without action". We determined that our goal to develop a Christ-centred service-learning framework required both learning and action for the whole school

community. We also argue that programmed service-learning is necessary to build student's knowledge of Scriptural principles and that a deliberate strategy to develop and enact specific intentions to enable students to promote a Christ-like character formation.

"True" action learning, if it is to be what the name implies, should incorporate both deep learning and real action" (Marquardt & Banks, 2010) as distinguished from experiential pedagogies. In our experience, our service-learning experience was intentional and also enabled students to participate in real-world activities. Thus, we argue that our action-learning process is a powerful way to engage students in leaning and action to deepen understanding of service.

Service as a way of being

Perhaps most importantly, we experienced growing consistency between our stated beliefs and our organisational practices. The result was a stronger sense of collective identity and a clearer understanding of what it means to be an Adventist learning community.

> *"The result was a stronger sense of collective identity"*

Evidence from a study of 1,322 schools found that home background factors had a large effect on academic achievement, but little or no effect on the socio-emotional outcomes for students (Sutherland, Hart, Oski & Tan, 2014). Therefore, they argue that schools play a significant role in the development of children for all walks of life. Our results showed that reported student wellbeing did change over a two-year period following a multi-faceted effort to direct students to action God's character through service. Further research around student service learning and service practice and their relationship to overall student wellbeing is worthy of study. Additionally, research is needed to explore the relationship between school-based service, ongoing community involvement, ongoing church participation and long-term faith commitment. The development of a biblically grounded service culture offers Adventist schools an important framework for nurturing faith that is active, relational and outward-looking.

While the journey continues, our experience suggests that intentionally cultivating a culture of humble service has the potential to deepen both educational practice and spiritual formation. When service is understood not merely as something that is done, but as a way of being, it becomes a powerful vehicle for shaping character, nurturing relationships, and helping students and staff alike live out the values at the heart of Adventist Education. "Long has God waited for the spirit of service to take possession of the whole church… according to his (or her) ability" (Ellen White, 2002, p. 111). "In sympathy and compassion, we are to minister to those in need of help" (Ellen White, 2002, p. 104). "It is in a life of service only that true happiness is found. Those who live useless, selfish lives are miserable" (Ellen White, Manuscript Release 8, p. 422). Sharing in God's plan for service helps to remedy human dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

A sustainable school culture of service begins with identity in Christ and grows through relationship with God, partnership in God's work, dependence upon God amid human limitations and participation in God's purposes. Through beholding, change occurs. Together, these foundations offer more than a rationale for organising service projects. They provide a framework for forming individuals whose faith is expressed through compassionate and purposeful action. When these principles are taught explicitly, modelled by staff and embedded in school practices, service can become part of the spiritual identity of the whole school community. Adventist education may then equip students not only to complete acts of service while at school, but also to enter adulthood prepared to participate faithfully, humbly and joyfully in God's work in the world. True service comes from those whose hearts are touched by God. TEACH

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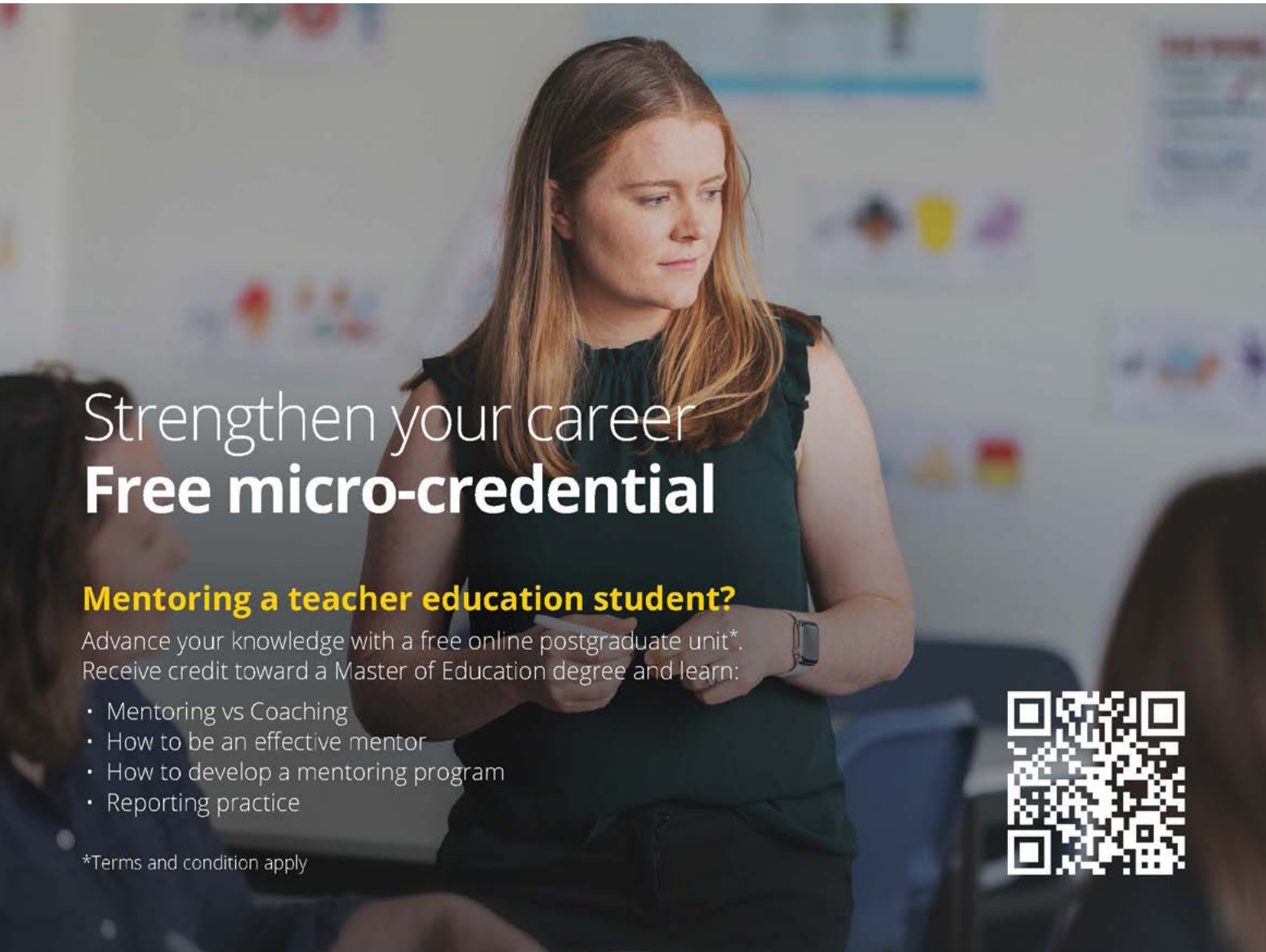
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The Increasing Need for Innovation in Schools

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Keywords: innovation, flexible learning, wellbeing

On February 25, 2006, Sir Ken Robinson, noted academic, author and internationally acclaimed speaker, delivered one of the most-watched education videos of all time, "Do Schools Kill Creativity"?

Robinson argued that modern education systems often suppress rather than nurture the creative abilities of young people. He contended that creativity is as important as literacy and should be given equal status in schools. Robinson believed that every child is born with immense creative potential, yet traditional schooling frequently discourages risk-taking, imagination, and originality.

A central theme of the talk is that children are naturally willing to experiment and make mistakes. Robinson argued that creativity requires this willingness because original ideas often emerge through trial and error. However, many schools create environments where mistakes are penalised, leading students to become fearful of being wrong. Over time, this can diminish confidence, innovation, and creative thinking.

Robinson also criticised the hierarchy of subjects found in most education systems. He observed that mathematics, science, and languages are generally prioritised, while the arts such as music, drama, and dance are treated as less important. He stated that this hierarchy reflects outdated industrial-age assumptions about what constitutes intelligence and success.

> *... every child bears unique God-given abilities that flourish when education values the whole person*

To illustrate his point, Robinson told the story of Gillian Lynne, who struggled in school but later became a world-renowned dancer and choreographer. Rather than having a behavioural problem, she simply learned and expressed herself through movement. Her success demonstrates the importance of recognising and developing diverse forms of intelligence and talent.

Ultimately, Robinson called for a fundamental transformation of education. Rather than producing conformity, schools should cultivate creativity, curiosity, and individual strengths. In a rapidly changing and unpredictable world, he argued that helping young people discover and develop their unique gifts is one of education's most important responsibilities.

For Christian educators and school leaders, Robinson's message is especially relevant: every child bears unique God-given abilities that flourish when education values the whole person, including mind, heart, body, and creativity.

This video is often referred to more than 20 years later and is often a stimulus that I use when trying to create discussion around the issues related to bringing something different to the classroom. Educators need to refine their ideas of what is "Old World" thinking and try to move the concept of what students might need for the future as we consider the changes that need to be undertaken in the education sphere, in order that the relevance of what we are doing can reflect the world that our students will inherit.

From my perspective, this video encapsulated the ideals that I was trying to establish in my own school. I was beginning my Principal leadership journey and had identified the areas that needed to be changed in order for schools to become more relevant in the future. This video allowed me to explain my thoughts more clearly and to allow others to hear from a world-leading expert about the need for educators to reconceptualise the future of education.

What I have learnt in over 20 years as a principal is that the concept of innovation in education is often limited to the digital world. Most leaders would harness their innovative ideas on how they can change the digital capacity of their school. In many schools, this has meant the creation of one-to-one programs, the addition of 3D printers and perhaps some tinkering with digital arts. These changes are valuable; please do not hear otherwise, but what Sir Ken Robinson was talking about 20 years ago still remains as a remnant of the belief that an IQ outcome is the most important component of a successful schooling experience.

I have long considered why the most successful

schools are deemed to be those with the highest academic results. It appears that we have set our eyes on this target and all schools will be measured against each other by these arbitrary standards. If we take a moment to break down this conceptual flaw, we can get an insight into what truly needs to change. News is a subjective view of a situation driven by "readership". Articles or videos are graded by the number of people engaging with the story. We know that of all headlines, "Elite Private School" as a tag line will gain enormous attention. And so with NAPLAN or ATAR league tables. Journalists can gather "Free Data" and build a narrative around who got the best results and therefore make an assumption that this must be the best school. I would argue that this narrow perspective may lead to the underlying premise that an IQ outcome is the most important thing gained from education, yet I also know that when parents are individually questioned, very few would consider that a high NAPLAN or ATAR score is more important than the development of the whole child, and while many schools discuss this concept, most are still driven by the metrics of the NAPLAN and ATAR data in the improvement of their organisations.

Sir Ken argued that a well-rounded individual needed to have exposure to a full range of curriculum experiences, including all aspects of the Arts. This is in contrast to a more contemporary view that the most necessary academic skills lie in the domains of literacy and numeracy.



Image: Hillcrest Virtual Learning Community student

My educational philosophy has been grounded in the deep conviction that the pursuit of learning is not something that is defined within a box. This was an attempt by the Governments of the time to ensure that there was equity for all children in the recognition that learning to read and write was a basic skill requirement of becoming individuals who provided something to the community rather than requiring constant support to just exist. In that sense, a classroom-based environment designed to deliver standard and repetitive learning was a good choice when access to education at the time and the level expected was far lower than we experience today.

In the redesign of future educational experiences, we therefore need to listen in to experts such as Sir Ken Robinson to best reinvent the future. There are questions that each of us should ask about the future of our students that may assist in providing a window into the way we need to innovate for their future. Questions might include:

1. **Will my child-- be known, valued and cared for?**
   A great school sees students as individuals, not numbers. Ask how teachers build relationships and support wellbeing, character, and belonging.
2. **Is my child learning how to think, not just what to think?**
   Education should develop curiosity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and wisdom rather than simply memorising content. Ask how the school will develop the whole child.
3. **Will my child discover and develop their unique God-given strengths?**
   Every child is different. Ask how the school identifies and nurtures gifts, passions, talents, and future personalised pathways.
4. **Does the learning connect to real life?**
   Students thrive when learning is meaningful. Look for authentic projects, community engagement, entrepreneurship, service, and practical application of knowledge.
5. **How will the school develop character as well as academic achievement?**
   Academic success matters, but so do integrity, resilience, compassion, humility, and perseverance. Ask how the school values and develops the soft skills needed for the future.
6. **What opportunities will my child have to lead and serve others?**
   Leadership is learned through experience. Ask how students are encouraged to

> *"... the pursuit of learning is not something that is defined within a box."*

influence, contribute, and make a difference in their community.

7. **Will my child be prepared for an uncertain and changing future?**
   The world is changing rapidly. Schools should equip students with adaptability, creativity, collaboration, communication skills, and digital fluency. Ask how teachers are developing their insights into the future world of learning.
8. **How will this journey shape who my child becomes?**
   The ultimate question is not simply, "What will my child achieve?" but "Who will my child become"? Ask how the school intentionally forms identity, faith, purpose, and a sense of calling.

> *How do we prepare children to flourish in God's world and contribute meaningfully to its future?*

As a parent, I know that the overarching question for many parents is: ***At the end of my child's schooling, will they have learned to love God, love people, think deeply, serve generously, lead courageously, and pursue excellence with humility?***

While the process of innovation can feel daunting, I have been undertaking this internal review of old practice for more than 20 years. This often comes from asking the question:

What if schools stopped asking, 'How do we teach the curriculum?' and instead asked, 'How do we prepare children to flourish in God's world and contribute meaningfully to its future?'

Some of the innovations in school might reflect:

1. Stage, Not Age Learning
Allow students to progress based on mastery rather than chronological age, enabling personalised growth and reducing learning gaps. This is something that we have chosen to embed at our new Village Yard Christian School.

2. Learning Villages
Replace traditional classrooms with flexible learning hubs that include collaboration spaces, quiet zones, maker areas, and outdoor environments. In 2016, we converted a car park into a learning environment for 300 students. No specific classrooms, just a series of open-planned spaces. This was so successful that we expanded it to the car park below for another 300 students. We always share that we now have 600 students learning in a car park each day.

3. Passion Projects
Dedicate one day each fortnight to student-directed projects based on personal interests and curiosities. Our Year 9 RISE program uses this idea for Future Fridays where students must go and volunteer in a passion area for them. This may include choices such as working at the local Op Shop or being a Surf Lifesaver; the difference this act of service makes for our students is profound.

4. Real-World Problem Solving
Students work on authentic community challenges such as environmental sustainability, homelessness, or local business solutions. When we constructed both the Middle Learning Community (MLC) precincts and the RISE program, the underlying premise was that Real World Learning through an integrated Design Centred Learning Framework would provide the right means for delivering the curriculum. The implementation of this is one of the key elements for the success of these programs, as students can gather and solve relevant and interesting real-world problems, as they could in any workplace. The intentional partnership and inclusion



Image: Year 9 RISE Program students working towards their Surf Rescue Certificates.

of parents as an authentic audience is another key component that ensures this style of innovative learning has real and long-term outcomes.

5. AI Learning Coaches
Use ethical AI tools to provide personalised feedback, learning pathways, revision support, and extension opportunities. Hillcrest has made the decision to partner with a number of different curriculum providers who use AI drivers to assess student understanding and learning. These include Century Tech in the UK, who are building a generative AI teacher that will support students in countries all over the world and provide learning opportunities for students in third-world countries.

6. Forest School Programs
Make nature a classroom where students learn science, mathematics, literacy, resilience, and teamwork outdoors. The Village Yard Christian School is founded on pedagogy that has been sourced from around the world, which includes learnings from visiting the Singapore Forrest Schools program in 2024. This pedagogy takes real-life examples and utilises the skills of students to learn from the experience of the environment. The new Village Yard curriculum program is intentionally designed around the natural environment. Students have an opportunity to learn in an incredible ecological environment where they can observe the beauty and wonder of nature and connect that to the curriculum program.

7. Entrepreneurial Learning
Students create real products, services, or social enterprises and learn marketing, budgeting, innovation, and leadership. Students throughout the MLC and RISE program are encouraged to develop broad and creative thinking aligned to entrepreneurial thinking. This innovative style of learning starts by encouraging students to dream of ideas that could make a difference in the world. Through an iterative process, these ideas are refined, packaged and then presented to a real audience for review. This style of learning has greatly enhanced student engagement, with some of the ideas even being taken into commercial production.

8. Immersive Learning Environments
Transform spaces into historical villages, science laboratories, rainforests, or space stations that make learning experiential. At Hillcrest, we purchased a fleet of buses so we could take students outside of the built environment as often as possible. Experiential learning means often being outside the classroom. The choice to own a fleet of buses was simple when compared to building a pool. I always respond with the adage “I can take a bus to the pool, but I can’t take a pool to the beach”. This resonates with many, as we can facilitate excursions at a relatively low cost with the transportation covered through the ownership of the bus fleet. We have also invested in virtual experiences with purpose-built facilities to encourage this exploration. The Hillcrest “Cornerstone” building has been designed to be a place where students can experience different styles of virtual pedagogies all in the one building. This is where we hope to simulate different environments through digital transformations to assist students in their learning. There will be opportunities for students to connect directly with people from around the world through the use of large-screen, high-fidelity technology that will allow them to experience being on an icebreaker heading to the South Pole or possibly exploring with a team of gold miners who are 1000 meters underground or even join deep-sea divers looking for lost treasure.

> *This innovative style of learning starts by encouraging students to dream of ideas*

9. Student-Led Conferences
Replacing traditional parent-teacher interviews with student-led presentations showcasing their own growth, goals, and achievements. This strategy has been employed in the MLC since its inception and is now considered normal practice. Teachers no longer take the lead; students share with their parents for as long as they need, with the teacher possibly observing two to three groups at a time. This saves teachers a significant amount of time compared to the traditional interview format, while giving students more space to share their learning meaningfully with

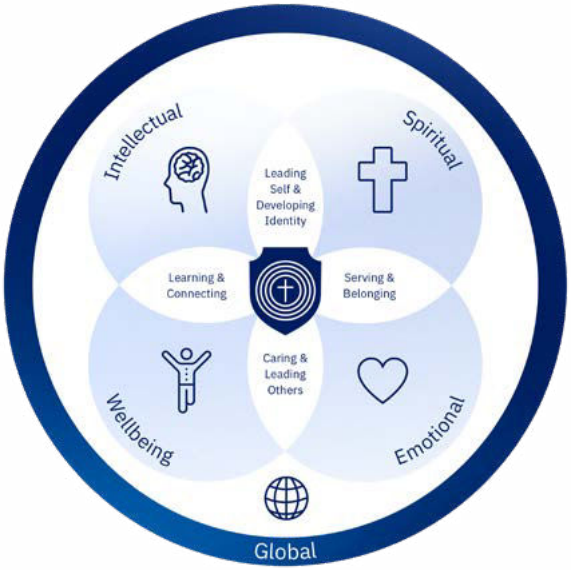


Image: The Hillcrest Educational Model

their parents. This gives the students the opportunity to share their learning experiences with their greatest champions, their parents, which is an important relationship-building practice.

10. Global Learning Partnerships
Connect classrooms with students around the world to collaborate on projects and develop cultural intelligence. Hillcrest has a valued partnership with Korean schools, and this has resulted in exchange programs for teachers, students and staff. Students are able to connect via video link and share real-time experiences such as dance, art, robotics and competitions. The development of these partnerships has further built student understanding of the global context of the world in which we live.

11. Design Thinking Studios
Teach students to identify problems, empathise, prototype, test, and refine solutions for real-world challenges. Students have developed their own "clubs" where their passions are able to be explored. This includes materials, games, robotics, podcasting and other areas of common interest. This is a personal innovative favourite of mine.

> *Teach emotional intelligence, resilience, mindfulness, healthy relationships, and mental fitness alongside academics.*

12. Wellbeing Curriculum
Teach emotional intelligence, resilience, mindfulness, healthy relationships, and mental fitness alongside academics. The Hillcrest Educational Model has been constructed around building a student's character through a wellbeing, emotional intelligence and spiritual values framework, before the task of intellectual learning occurs. Students who build a foundation and understanding of "who they are and whose they are" are far more equipped to achieve their potential in academic outcomes.

13. Micro-Credential Learning
Allow students to earn digital badges and certifications in skills such as coding, leadership, public speaking, or AI. The SECRET Skills Framework at Hillcrest Christian College is a personalised learning and growth framework designed to develop the essential life and workplace soft skills which students need to thrive. It comprises 24 skills across six domains: Self-Manager, Effective Participator, Creative Thinker, Reflective Learner, Enquirer, and Team Worker. These skills encompass cognitive, strategic, social, and emotional competencies that support personal growth and lifelong learning. A distinctive feature of the framework is its emphasis on student ownership, with learners collecting evidence of their development and engaging in self and peer assessment. Through progressive accreditation levels, students are encouraged to reflect, grow, and demonstrate the character, resilience, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities needed for success in an ever-changing world.

14. Cross-Age Learning Communities
Older students mentor younger students, strengthening leadership while reinforcing learning for both groups. This is a simple practice where students are given the responsibility for caring for others. In a digital world where meaningful face-to-face connection is increasingly rare, I believe this act of service powerfully reframes how students think, both as a mentor and a mentee. I am an earnest believer that middle school students need to have a mentor who is slightly older and can provide wisdom during a stage when students are still growing in maturity, confidence and discernment.

15. Maker Spaces and Innovation Labs
While maker spaces often bring to mind robotics, 3D printing and coding, I believe innovation should extend well beyond the classroom walls. Junkyard study, nature-based exploration, gaming, cultural immersion, global connections and controlled virtual experiences all create rich opportunities for students to explore, create and collaborate around areas of personal interest. At Hillcrest, these experiences help students see learning as dynamic, shared and deeply connected to their passions.

16. Adventure Learning Expeditions
Take learning beyond campus through field studies, camps, cultural immersions, and outdoor challenges. I certainly believe that when a student experiences being away from their normal environment, they grow. New sounds, different smells, visual contour, texture and even temperature refine their understanding. Camping experiences, service/



Image: Hillcrest students on a service trip to Cooktown, QLD.

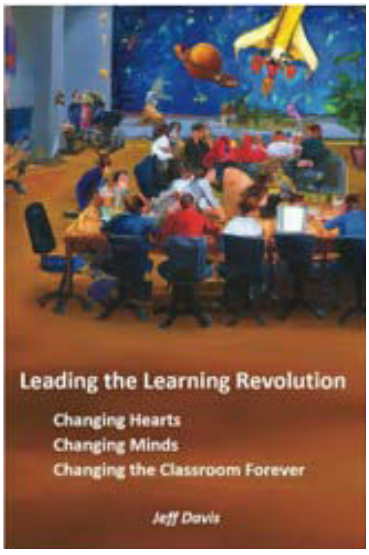
missions trips and overseas curriculum excursions provide these types of learning experiences, and when combined with programs such as "Duke of Edinburgh" and our year-long Year 9 RISE program, which is based off campus, they become much richer and more meaningful, which is the choice we have made at Hillcrest.

17. Flexible Timetables
Move beyond rigid subject blocks towards longer learning experiences that allow deeper inquiry and creativity. Village Yard Christian School has a double shift of four and a half hours each day with teachers earning 150% of their usual salary at a normal school by teaching two classes each day. The public perception will undoubtedly assume the shorter day equates to reduced learning, but this is not the expectation. We believe learning doesn't just happen in the classroom and, as such, students will spend their mornings or afternoons learning in a different environment that is just as valid. The Hillcrest Virtual Learning Community (VLC) is another example of how we can offer a different timetabled innovative environment. Of course, we will be actively pursuing hybrid learning as an option in the future to allow families choice in the way their children best learn.

18. Learning Through Service
Embed community service into the curriculum so students experience compassion, leadership, and purpose. As a Christian school, we believe service should be embedded into the life of the College from a young age, not treated as an optional extra. When students regularly serve others, they develop compassion, perspective and a deeper understanding of their responsibility to contribute meaningfully to the world around them.

19. Personal Learning Dashboards
Give students access to real-time data about their learning progress, goals, strengths, and next steps. The next stage of AI is to use these technologies to effectively and continually update students on their progress. This is not as straightforward as we expected; however, under the mantra of "no surprises", students will shortly be able to track their achievements and follow their progress in all subjects.

20. Purpose and Calling Pathways
Help students explore their strengths, values, faith, and vocational interests so they graduate with a strong sense of identity and purpose. Work experience is hard to organise but incredibly valuable to the students who participate. The risk of doing such a program is enormous but an essential part of growing up. Careers expos and guest speakers broaden the horizons of students and parents and, when a pathway emerges, give the student a clear personal academic pathway to reach their goal, establishing confidence and dedication to their learning outcome of choice.



You will note that these innovations have little to do with just technology, yet Hillcrest is a leading school in the digital domain, having won many awards for innovation, including being named as one of the 100 most innovative schools in the world. When we balance the shift in classroom learning, we need to consider the skills students need rather than how they can use a computer. Digital innovation is important and perhaps the easiest way to claim being innovative, but I would prefer to see a balanced approach where each child's learning experiences are valued more than just teaching the curriculum. When the student learning experiences remain the foci, everything seems to take place far more easily.

As the subtitle of *Leading the Learning Revolution* suggests, innovation in education is not about chasing novelty; it is about having the courage to lead learning into places that change hearts, minds and classrooms forever, so that we might better serve students, families and the world they will inherit. My hope is that each of us continues to ask better questions, take thoughtful risks and remain committed to shaping schools where every child can flourish. TEACH

> *Embed community service into the curriculum so students experience compassion, leadership, and purpose.*

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TEACH[R]

From Words to Practice: Teaching Staff Perspectives on Their School's Mission and Vision

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Keywords: Vision, mission, values, strategy, purpose

Abstract

This research examined the influence of vision and mission statements on teachers within a school context. A quantitative methodology was used to survey 23 teachers from an independent school in NSW to determine these statements' impact on their daily practice. Ninety-one per cent of teachers recalled most or all the vision; however, over half recalled only one or no mission themes. Most (86%) teachers perceived that the vision or mission statements impacted their daily practice. These findings deviate significantly from the literature on this topic, which suggests that teachers are generally less aligned with their school's vision or mission statements. It is recommended that further research be conducted to determine the reasons behind these results, along with contributing further to the limited body of knowledge on this topic.

> *Do teachers clearly understand how they can achieve the school's vision and mission?*

Introduction

Vision and mission statements are commonplace strategic centrepieces for organisations, ranging from small businesses to global corporations. Although these documents originated in the business world (Drucker, 1974), the statements have, over the decades, become central pillars within schools' strategic planning.

This study explored the extent to which these statements reportedly influenced the teaching staff at an independent school ('the school') in their daily practices. The research addressed three key questions: (1) To what extent do the staff at 'the school' recall the content of their school's vision and mission statements? (2) What impact do these statements have on teachers' daily practices? and (3) Do teachers clearly understand how they can achieve the school's vision and mission?

Previous research (Gurley et al., 2015) indicates that vision and mission statements need greater visibility in order to achieve their reason for existence. The current study is critical because it provides insights into 'the school's' day-to-day organisational dynamics and can contribute to the school's ongoing journey with its vision and mission. These adjustments could lead to more significant alignment and clarity of the school's objectives and ultimately enhance its effectiveness in realising its core identity.

Many studies have established that foundation statements impact school climate, enhance leadership, and improve outcomes (Bialik & Merhav, 2020; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). However, only some studies have focused on teachers' perspectives regarding the impact or influence vision and mission statements have on their professional practice within a school setting (Duberstein, 2021). Darbi (2012) concurs, stating from an educational perspective that "we know relatively little about how employees

perceive the missions and how these perceptions relate to other organisational attitudes such as satisfaction and behaviours" (p. 96).

These previous studies tend to explore the quality of an organisation's vision and mission statements and link this to the impact on school outcomes or performance (Martin, 2021; Vanari & Eisenschmidt, 2022). This observation identifies a need for research that focuses on teacher perspectives and practice when investigating foundation statements and their impact on their teaching practice.

Numerous studies in the corporate or not-for-profit field have been undertaken to ascertain the impact of vision or mission on employees (Dobrinić & Fabac, 2021; Houts, 2022; Slåtten et al., 2021). A common theme from these studies was employees' low understanding or awareness of their foundation statements or a general misalignment with the vision and mission. Notably, vision and mission statements are used widely within schools across the globe. They are considered central to school strategic planning; however, their impact on teachers remains to be determined.

Literature Review

Vision and mission statements have been incorporated into the strategic planning of countless educational facilities and corporate organisations for decades (Fraser, 2021; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). However, school strategy studies, particularly the impacts of vision and mission, have been under-researched (Carvalho et al., 2021). There are numerous studies on implementing and forming vision and mission statements, but Fraser (2021) explains that historical research about vision and mission has predominantly been taken from a leadership perspective, and as Slatten et al. (2021) note, "Consequently, an employee perspective when studying aspects related to organizational vision has to a large extent been neglected" (p. 3).

The literature suggests differing views on the impact of vision and mission statements within schools and organisations. Many studies analyse the content of these statements, while others explore the characteristics of successful leaders and their relationship with vision and mission. This literature review explores the existing research on the implementation and impact of vision and mission statements, explicitly focusing on their impact within educational settings.

Background

Drucker (1974) is the inspiration behind what we know today as vision and mission statements. He proposed three pertinent questions of an organisation that are critical to the strategic planning process: "1.) Where are we going? 2) What business are we in? 3) How are we going to get there?" (David, 2020, p. 87). David (2020) proposes that the first question is essentially a vision. The second question relates to the mission, and the final question establishes the goals needed in order to achieve the vision and mission. Since the early 1980s, when mission statements became popular, they have become central strategic management tools worldwide (Alegre et al., 2018; Houts, 2022).

Defining Terms

Davis (2018), along with Vanari and Eisenschmidt (2022), argue that there is mounting evidence that vision and mission statements can be used interchangeably and are synonymous - adding a layer of ambiguity to the core purposes of each statement. Nevertheless, many scholars subscribe to crucial differences in content and purpose between the statements. While Houts (2022) noted that there are, in fact, no standard definitions for these statements.

Gurley et al. (2015) contend, from a school perspective, that despite much literature on vision and mission statements, there remains a broad misunderstanding of what each of these terms means, along with a lack of appreciation for the importance of establishing such statements in the school-improvement process.

Terminology, definitions and how vision and mission statements are incorporated differ among organisations, including schools. As Duberstein (2021) notes, there is no one officially accepted definition of the following terms:

- mission statement
- vision statement
- purpose statement
- creed statement
- values statement
- core values statement
- goals statement
- strategy statement
- guiding statement
- principles statement

"Foundation statements" (Sun & Leithwood, 2015) is an umbrella term that can encompass all these statements, but likely includes predominantly vision, mission, goals, and values statements. For this research paper, the focus is on the core commonly used terms – vision and mission statements.

Vision Statements

A vision statement articulates the desired future state of an organisation (Mombourquette, 2017;

> *"Vision and mission statements are used widely within schools across the globe….. however, their impact on teachers remains to be determined."*

Dobrinić & Fabac, 2021). Bialik and Merhav (2020) describe vision statements in a school setting as "forward-thinking, states future goals, includes values, is inspirational, and pertains to educational goals" (p. 448). The vision should inspire, enhance self-confidence, and foster a shared purpose among those it includes (Slåtten et al., 2021).

"In essence, vision states a direction and describes the end of the journey" (Taiwo, 2016, p. 128). According to David (2020), an organisation needs to understand its desired destination before it can plan the strategy to reach that point. The contents of the vision must be attainable - which adds to Hinton's (2022) assertion of the importance of establishing a timeframe as part of an effective vision formation process. Simon Sinek (2017), a highly regarded authority in organisational leadership, argues that if we cannot effectively measure our progress toward the vision, how will employees know if they are making meaningful progress? Sinek (2017) adds that the vision clearly describes what the world would look like if we succeeded completely. In agreement with Sinek (2017) and Slåtten et al. (2021), Gurley et al. (2015) add that in an organisation with a clearly articulated and implemented vision statement, employees are exact concerning their heading, what their goal is and how they will know when they have achieved it. The vision provides clarity to stakeholders within an organisation and the broader community (Bunkowski & Shelton, 2019).

"In establishing an organisation's purpose, experts have recognised the importance of developing a mission statement"

Mission Statements

In establishing an organisation's purpose, experts have recognised the importance of developing a mission statement (Gurley et al., 2015). A mission statement outlines the fundamental, unique purpose, why an organisation exists, key direction and a context for decision-making (Gurley et al., 2015). Further, Boerema (2006) adds that a school's mission statement also guides the implementation of the educational program.

Despite differences and nuanced distinctions in the contents and rationale of mission statements, Gurley (2015) contends that expressing a clear mission statement is essential to ensure a shared understanding of the school's main objectives. Stating further, that the mission statement "provides key direction to those individuals performing the core technology of a school, namely teaching and learning" (Gurley et al., 2015, p. 223)

Vision and Mission Impact

Despite the lack of clarity in defining and articulating precisely what content vision and mission statements should include, many authors have agreed that foundation statements are an integral component of successful school and student outcomes (Bialik & Merhav, 2020; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Taiwo (2016) builds upon the importance of these foundation statements by adding that "The most crucial step in strategic planning is formulating the vision and mission statements. Strategic planning success depends largely on the proper identification and formulation of the vision and mission statements" (p. 127). However, Coker (2022) adds a note of caution, commenting that "Mission statements set the stage by gross oversimplification, a false sense of unity, and grandiose operations and results" (p. 219). From a practical standpoint, Coker (2022) adds that examining practitioners' real-world experiences reveals that mission statements are often just outdated, unfamiliar documents, noting that there must be a distinction between the mere presence of foundation statements and their actual implementation.

Leithwood et al. (2020) conducted an extensive meta-analysis of the literature on successful school leadership. The findings identified "domains of practice" (p. 8) that successful school leaders addressed regularly. Setting direction through shared vision, identifying goals, holding high expectations, and regularly communicating the school's vision and goals were identified within the first domain. The evidence Leithwood et al. (2020) indicated that schools with leaders who practised these, achieved higher student outcomes while strengthening the school climate. Sun and Leithwood (2015) established in their study that a strong vision and mission, supported with goals, would provide a solid reference point not only to guide teachers and provide a lens through which decisions of direction could be made, but also to help determine how resources would be allocated

The literature offers limited insight into the role of well-crafted and articulated foundation statements in guiding school leaders during critical decision-making processes. When a school leader refers to their foundation statements, what kinds of situations, problems, or challenges are they facing? Is clarity brought about through referring directly to the statements when making decisions as a leader?

Developing Vision and Mission Statements

For strategic plans to succeed, they typically depend on the correct formulation of vision and mission statements and broad participation in their formulation (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). The implementation of these direction-setting actions is reported as being a crucial component of school strategic planning. Coker (2022) and Taiwo (2016) explain that when beginning the foundation statement process, the vision comes first, guiding

the mission; without a clear vision of the future, completing the mission may be unattainable. Aligning to this notion, David et al. (2021) point out that "A clear vision provides the foundation for developing a comprehensive mission statement. Many organisations have both a vision and a mission statement, but the vision statement should be established first and foremost" (David et al. 202, p. 24)

The Role of School Leadership

The role of the principal in the effective implementation of a school's vision and mission has also been reported as being crucial to a school's success (Martin, 2021; Chen & Yuan, 2021; Vanari & Eisenschmidt, 2022). Fraser (2021) argues that "Leaders are at the center of implementing a school culture based on its Vision, Mission and Values and are responsible for setting direction and modelling the behaviors necessary to achieve these" (p. 76). For a principal, collaboratively formulating and communicating a vision, encouraging the acceptance of shared objectives, establishing high-performance expectations, overseeing organisational outcomes, and facilitating effective communication and teamwork are key elements of a principal's direction- setting practices (Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

Embedding Vision and Mission within Schools

The process of embedding vision and mission within the organisation and its staff is vital. Gurley et al. (2018) explain that "even if a vision statement is clearly articulated, and even perhaps framed and hanging in the front hall, the vision itself may not have been internalized by key formal and informal leaders" (p. 222).

Importantly, once the vision is created, Mombourquette (2017) explains that wide communication must ensue, followed by focusing staff on the achievement of the vision, along with regularly celebrating successful actions that align with the vision.

Slåtten et al. (2021) posit that leaders must seek the staff or employees' perspective in fulfilling the effective integration of a vision. It is the employees who ultimately decide whether to accept or ignore the vision. "Therefore, an organizational vision integration can only be considered as successfully achieved when it provides conscious directions and acts as an 'inner mental voice' that 'guides the behaviour of organizational actors" (p. 2). Both Duberstein (2021) and Fraser (2021) echo this sentiment of modelled leadership and collaborative construction of vision.

Goal Setting and School Climate

Themes within the literature linking positive school climate with clear, practical, direction-setting practices are notable. Vanari and Eisenschmidt (2022) specify the unity of direction-setting statements, adding that "As a result of direction-setting, it is critical to align vision, mission, and goals, all of which contribute to the development of school culture" (p. 5). Setting goals, coupled with creating a shared vision within a culture of high expectations, according to Leithwood et al. (2015), leads to positive school outcomes.

Principals committed to including staff voice in determining a school vision, coupled with the ongoing dialogue and collaborative efforts between staff and leadership to develop, track, and celebrate school goals, make a significant impact on school climate (Leithwood et al., 2015; Vanari & Eisenschmidt, 2022).

Coker (2022) suggests that the school climate is a vital component in achieving the stated mission. The commitment of the organisation to its ideals, the effectiveness of the communication between staff, sharing of knowledge, culture building, and focusing on success all require strong leadership. These elements breathe life into the mission statement.

> *... the school climate is a vital component in achieving the stated mission.*

Research Questions

This study explored the extent to which the school's vision and mission statements influenced the teaching staff at 'the school' in their daily practice. The research addressed three key questions:

1. To what extent do the staff at 'THE SCHOOL' recall the content of their school's vision and mission statements?
2. What reported impact do these statements have on teachers' daily practices?
3. Do teachers clearly understand how they can achieve the school's vision and mission?

Design

A positivist philosophy was adopted for this study (Ryan, 2018). The data were collected through a digital questionnaire and questions primarily utilised measurable, Likert scale options.

Methodology

Participants and recruitment

A randomised selection of teachers from Pre-Kindy to Year 12 was sought to participate in the research. The total teacher sample size for this study was 23 represented around 25% of the total teacher number for the school. Each participant volunteered to complete the self-administered survey without pressure. The teachers within each sub-school

completed the questionnaire in an after-school stage or faculty meeting.

Research instruments

The instrument used to administer this research was a 12-question digital Google Forms questionnaire. This choice allowed participants to complete the task in under five minutes. The questionnaire provided a consistent questioning format with the ability to choose the most effective response format.

Two questions were open response, which allowed respondents to recall what they knew of the vision and mission statements. The first question confirmed consent, with respondents unable to continue until that question was answered. Six forced-choice Likert questions offered four standard options. Two demographic questions ascertained teacher experience and whether they predominantly taught in high school or primary school.

> *One hundred per cent of participants correctly identified 'thriving' as one of the four themes*

Results

Microsoft Excel software was used to analyse the data and create graphical representations of the data. Descriptive statistics were employed to identify trends and patterns in the responses to specific questions. Cross-tabulation was incorporated to explore correlations between continuous variables (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021).

This section outlines the results of the survey - where data was collected from a total of teachers. Sixteen respondents from the primary school and seven high school teachers. The results are organised according to this study's three research questions.

Research question 1

1. **To what extent do the staff at 'THE SCHOOL' recall the content of their school's vision and mission statements?**
   'The school' Vision: We desire...A community where we all thrive and live abundantly in Jesus.

Table 2 details the four key themes and their coding. The following themes were identified in 'The school' vision statement: community, thriving, abundant living, and faith. Each survey response was then analysed, and the number and type of themes present were tabled.

One hundred per cent of participants correctly identified 'thriving' as one of the four themes (Table 2).

Half of the respondents correctly produced all four themes of the vision (Figure 1).

Over 90% of respondents recalled either all themes or three out of the four themes (Figure 2).

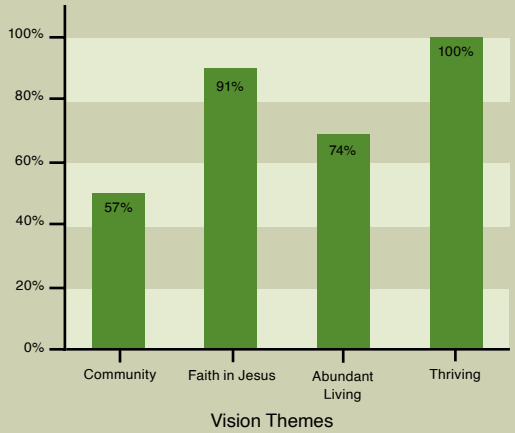
Mission: *We strive...To create connected and dynamic learning opportunities grounded in the love of Jesus, advocating service to others and individual excellence.*

Similar to the methodology applied to the content analysis of the vision statements, the mission statements followed the same process

Table 2: *Vision Statement Themes*

Code	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
COM	Community	13	57%
TH	Thrive	23	100%
ABL	Abundant living	17	74%
FAITH	Faith in Jesus	21	91%

Figure 1: *Staff Recall of Vision Themes*



of identifying the themes: connection, dynamic learning, love/with Jesus, service, and excellence. The frequency of each theme was then analysed and recorded (Table 3, Figure 2). Over half of the teachers could recall only one theme or no themes at all. No respondents correctly identified all themes within the mission statement. The two most frequently recalled themes were 'loving Jesus' (39%) and 'dynamic learning' (35%).

Research Question 2

2. **What impact and/or influence do the vision and/or mission statements have on the day-to-day practices of teachers at 'THE SCHOOL'?**

Figure 3 shows that 86% of respondents

Table 3: *Mission Statement Themes*

Code	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
CONN	Connection	5	22%
DL	Dynamic Learning	8	35%
JES	Love Of Jesus	9	39%
SER	Service	3	13%
EXC	Excellence	3	13%

Figure 2: *Staff Recall of Mission*

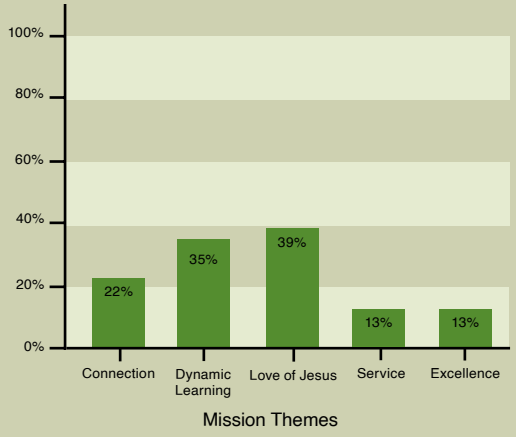


Figure 3: *Impact of vision and mission statements on daily practice*

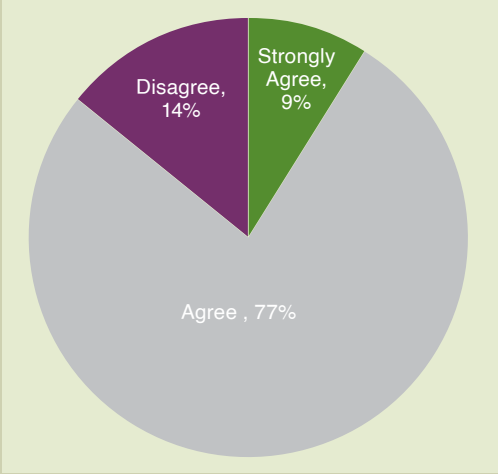


Table 4: *Years of experience compared with impact of statements*

Years of Teaching Experience	Frequency AGREE/Strongly Agree	Frequency DISAGREE
5 or less	2	0
6 – 14	7	4
15 – 24	6	0
25+	4	0

> *... a large majority of staff only occasionally refer to the 'the school' Vision or Mission statements*

'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' with the 'THE SCHOOL' Vision and/or Mission statement impacting their daily practice. This suggests that most teachers feel optimistic about the impact of one or both statements on their daily teaching practice.

In a cross-tabulation analysis, when comparing the data of teachers with 6-14 years' experience (who account for half of the total responses), they were the only group that included participants who responded negatively to being impacted by the school's vision or mission (Table 4).

In determining deeper clarity among staff relating to impact, the survey asked teachers to choose how often the mission or vision statements provided guidance or influenced decisions within their professional context. Figure 4 suggests that a large majority of staff only occasionally refer to the 'the school' Vision or Mission statements for guidance and/or for making decisions throughout the year. Only two of 23 teachers refer to the statements weekly or daily.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses, with a large majority (88%) of teachers referring to the statements either once per term or on one to two occasions per year.

Research Question 3

3. Do 'the school' teachers have clarity in how they can personally and collectively achieve the school vision and mission?

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed they had clarity over their next steps in achieving the 'the school' mission. As shown in Figure 5, fifteen out of twenty-two teachers indicated they knew what actions to take. No teachers responded with strong agreement or strong disagreement.

When analysing the data with greater depth, Figure 6 shows that all high school teachers responded positively to having clarity regarding their next steps in achieving the school mission. By contrast, the primary school was closely split in its

Figure 4: *Staff regularity in referencing vision or mission statements*

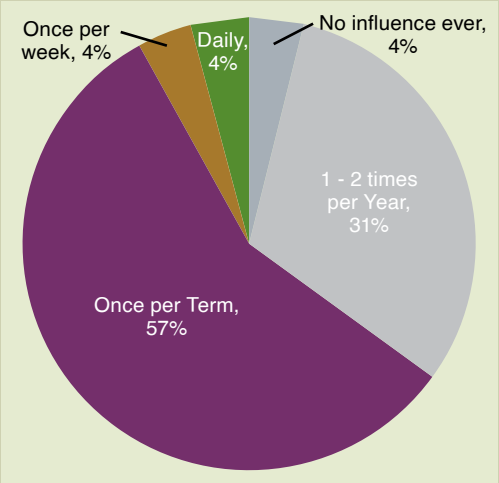


Figure 5: *Individual staff clarity in knowing personal steps to achieve 'the school' Mission.*

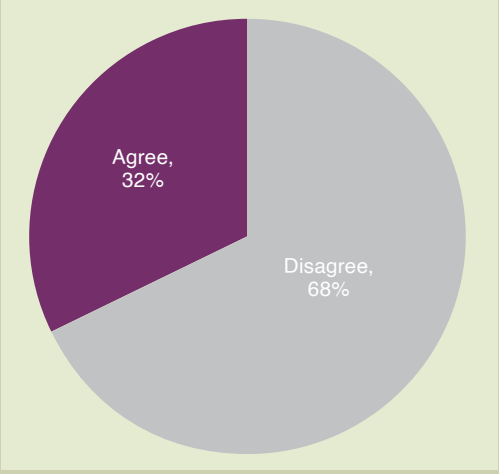


Figure 6: *Primary and high school staff on clarity of next steps in achieving school mission.*

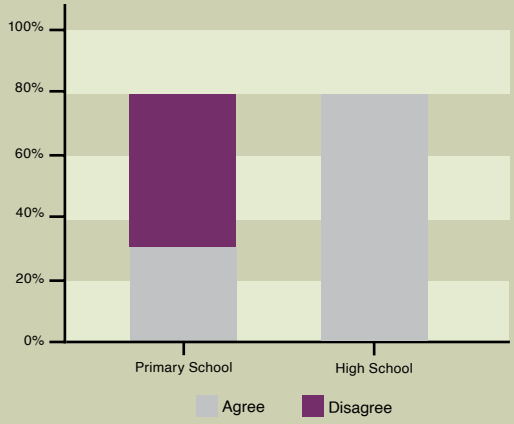
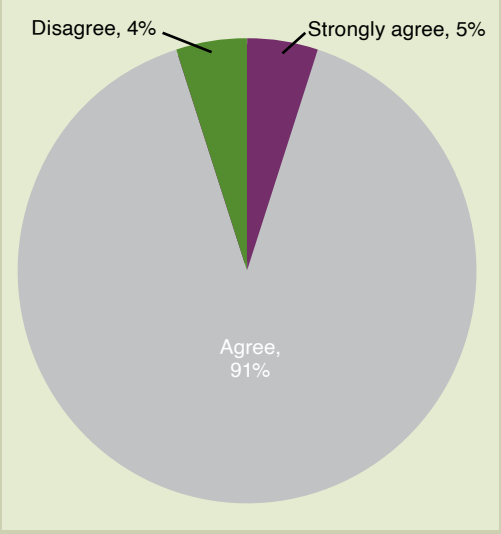


Figure 7: *Staff clarity on the school's vision and mission for the future*



> *The data suggests a clear split in teacher agreement regarding clarity on what actions the school community should take*

agreement to the same question.

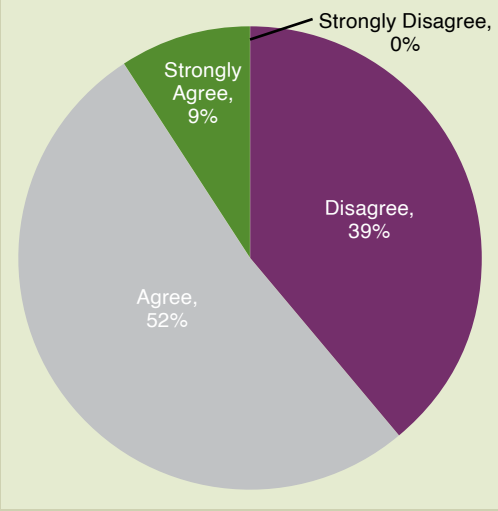
Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement: 'Thinking about 'the school's' vision and mission, I have a strong sense of what this community/school is aiming to 'look' like.' All but one respondent agreed or strongly agreed to having clarity regarding this statement (Figure 7).

Participants were asked to rate their perception of the collective actions 'the school' needs to take in order to achieve its mission or vision. The data suggests a clear split in teacher agreement regarding clarity on what actions the school community should take to achieve these goals.

Figure 8 shows lower confidence in teachers' perceptions of 'the school's' next steps, with only two respondents strongly agreeing. While over half of the teachers feel they have clarity, nearly 40% perceive a lack of clarity from a whole-school perspective.

The final component of the survey required respondents to select one or more of the options provided (as shown in Table 5). These options suggested ways the school (and its teachers) could

Figure 8: *Staff perceptions of necessary collective actions to achieve the Mission/Vision*



more intentionally help embed better teaching practices aimed at 'the school' realising its vision and mission.

The option that resonated highest with staff - "Celebrating successes that exemplify the school's vision and mission" garnered 70% of those surveyed. All but one high school participant selected this idea, and just over half of the primary school respondents thought the initiative would benefit them in embedding the vision and mission into their classrooms.

Only two out of 23 respondents believed that none of the suggested ideas would benefit them in more effectively aligning their teaching practice with 'the school's' vision and mission. This suggests that an overwhelming majority of staff felt that more could or should be initiated to achieve greater success. The second most popular idea related to communication and discussion of examples of good practice (linked to embedding vision or mission in daily teaching) is being shared with staff. Over 60% of staff thought this idea would benefit them.

Nearly 50% of staff responded that it would be beneficial for the Leadership team to set clear and specific goals or targets that related to the school's vision and mission (refer to Table 6).

Discussion

This study explored the extent to which 'the school's' vision and mission statements influence teachers' daily teaching practices. The results indicate a strong understanding and recall of the school's vision; however, the mission is much less prominent in their minds. Despite this, most staff perceive

> *"The option that resonated highest with staff - "Celebrating successes that exemplify the school's vision and mission"*

Table 5: *Staff ideas to embed the school's vision and mission*

Potential Ideas Embed 'the school's' Vision & Mission	H.S (7)	P.S (16)	Total	Total %
Celebrating successes that exemplify the school's vision and mission.	6	11	17	74%
Have examples provided, suggesting how the vision and mission are realised in day-to-day activities.	3	11	14	61%
Creating opportunities for staff to share personal stories related to the vision and mission.	3	8	11	48%
Staff and Leadership collaboratively set clear, specific goals/targets that align with the vision and mission.	4	7	11	48%
Introduce regular segments within staff meetings where ideas, discussion and/or brief PD occur.	4	5	9	40%
Incorporating the vision and mission into lesson planning and curriculum development.	1	6	7	30%
One or more of the above; however, I would find it difficult to implement another focus into my teaching.	0	6	6	26%
None of the above. What we do currently is adequate.	1	1	2	9%
None of the above. I would find it difficult to implement another focus into my teaching.			0	0%

that the school's foundational statements impact their daily practices. In the following discussion, these findings are compared with and interpreted in light of prior research. Each of the three research questions will be addressed, along with a discussion regarding the associated results.

To what extent do the staff at 'the school' recall the content of their school's vision and mission statements?

While 70% recalled one, two or three themes out of the possible five, 30% did not recall any part of the mission correctly (Figure 3). Gurley et al.'s (2015) findings deviate sharply from this result, revealing that 86% of respondents identified no element of their school's mission statement.

Similarly, when asked about their school's vision, the results from Gurley et al. (2015) and Kopaneva and Sias (2015) differed significantly from this study, as only 20% and 17% of their respondents, respectively, could recall any part of the vision statement. Compared with over 90% of 'the school' respondents recalling either three out of four themes or all themes, this demonstrates that 'the school' staff are highly cognisant of the contents within its vision statement.

> *Awareness of a school's foundational statements and taking action to fulfil them are distinct elements.*

Further qualitative research would need to establish what specific factors most likely contributed to this outcome. However, in saying this, the motivational nature coupled with the succinctness of 'the school's' vision statement (11 words) may have contributed to its higher recall rate. Deus et al. (2016) and Gurley et al. (2015) emphasise that concise and specific vision statements foster staff ownership and recall. Additionally, starting five years ago, 'the school' actively revised and refined its vision through a whole-school collaborative development process. Gurr (2015) and Hinton (2022) underscore the importance of co-creating a school vision to achieve staff buy-in, which may explain the high level of recall observed among 'the school' staff. Furthermore, intentional actions by leadership suggest that the vision statement be visible and reinforced regularly in the minds of staff. This can be evidenced through it being prominently displayed in a common meeting area, posted on meeting agendas, and each staff member receiving their own framed desk print of the vision and mission.

Conversely, the low recall of the mission statement at 'the school' is consistent with previous studies (Darbi, 2012; Gurley et al., 2015). While the mission statement is not excessively long at 22 words, its length may still contribute to the lower recall, as it is twice as lengthy as the vision statement. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that the mission is rarely discussed or used as a guiding reference in whole-school or sub-school meetings. However, Leithwood et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis of effective leadership practices recommends that principals must regularly communicate the school's mission, vision, and goals to foster positive staff engagement and buy-in.

This aspect of the study successfully assessed the extent of teachers' recall of both the vision and mission statements. These findings provide valuable insights for principals and school leaders aiming to implement or refresh a school vision, as they illustrate a successful real-world example of vision recall—a feat not seen in the literature.

What impact do the vision and mission statements have on the day-to-day practices of teachers at 'the school'?

The results were unexpected, deviating from prior research. Most surveyed teachers (86%) agreed that the school's mission or vision positively impacted their daily practices. By contrast, Gurley et al. (2015) found that over half of their respondents felt these foundational statements had little or no influence on their professional practices, with similar findings recorded by Darbi (2012).

Delving deeper, respondents were asked how often they referred to the mission or vision for guidance or decision-making in their professional practices. This question aimed to quantify the impact and provide evidence of influence. Surprisingly, 92% of teachers (Figure 6) referred to the foundational statements only once per term or never. However, given that most teachers agreed they were impacted daily by the vision or mission, it would seem that these foundational principles had in fact, been internalised.

Do 'the school' teachers have clarity in how they can personally and collectively achieve the school vision and mission?

Awareness of a school's foundational statements and taking action to fulfil them are distinct elements. Several survey questions explored whether teachers at 'the school' have clarity regarding these next steps. The results showed a generally positive attitude, with nearly 70% of teachers agreeing that they understood what personal actions were needed to fulfil the school's vision and/or mission. All but one teacher reported having a strong sense of what 'the school' should look like if it were achieving its vision and mission. This is a promising outcome for the school's leadership. Taiwo (2016) and Martin (2021) emphasise the importance of

principals consistently communicating the vision, while Mombourquette (2017) found that high performing schools often had leaders who regularly articulated their vision, mission, and goals.

Figure 8 data determined that almost 50% of primary teachers conveyed uncertainty about their own personal next steps in aligning their teaching practices with the school's vision and mission. Contrasting this, 100% of the high school participants agreed they had a clear understanding of what was required - personally. Speculatively, being departmental in the high school and having a more singular curriculum focus might be a cause for this disparity.

Respondents were given nine strategies to improve alignment (Table 6). Almost three-quarters of teachers selected "celebrating successes that exemplify good teaching practice aligned with 'the school's' vision and mission" as the most popular option. Mombourquette (2017) suggests that celebrating such successes is critical for school leaders seeking to strengthen alignment and positively impact school culture. Nearly 50% of respondents supported setting goals collaboratively with school leaders. A plethora of literature evidences the importance of effective communication, coupled with data-driven goals, having a significant impact on school improvement efforts (Vanari & Eisenschmidt, 2022). These results can be safely interpreted to suggest that the teachers at 'the school' have a collective desire to align themselves more closely with the vision and mission.

This study aimed to understand the general perceptions, commitment, and impact 'the school's' vision and mission have on its teaching staff. The three research questions focused on the degree of influence the current vision and mission statements have on teachers at 'the school' and their daily practices. The results revealed a consistently high level of recall for the school's vision; however, recall for the mission was notably low across both sub-schools. Building on these findings, most teaching staff expressed positivity and openness to exploring new ways or initiatives to better align their practices with 'the school's' vision and mission. The final key finding – one that challenges prior literature – showed that most staff felt the statements positively impacted their daily teaching practice.

Importantly, consideration needs to be offered when comparing to previous literature, as this study is centred around teachers' perspectives within the same school, therefore contributing uniquely to the research in this area.

Conclusion

Research Significance

The research conducted in this study supplied a solid contribution to the limited empirical research relating to the impact of vision and mission statements on teachers and their daily practice. The unique perspective and findings of the study uncovered results that challenge similar studies. Previous literature noted that employees and teachers are generally misaligned and do not know their foundation statements. This paper concluded results contrary to the existing literature. Findings from this study could drive strategic planning conversations within many school leadership forums. Raising awareness of an often overlooked element (linking the impact of foundation statements on teachers) within a school leadership context and applying this to one's own school situation is possible. The results of this study certainly suggest clear areas of focus for the leadership group and outline specific strategies to employ in lifting alignment with the school's foundation statements.

> *"... the teachers at 'the school' have a collective desire to align themselves more closely with the vision and mission."*

Implications & Recommendations

It is suggested that the key findings of the study be discussed within the executive leadership team to determine, together, what actions should be taken next. Due to the mission statement being much less prominent in the minds of the teaching staff, as evidenced by the results, it is safe to assume the statement's impact has a lot of unmet potential. Consulting the mission with greater regularity with teachers and leaders, through formal and informal dialogue, is recommended. This could be achieved through various forums, such as regular discussions in whole-school meetings, professional learning sessions, and the inclusion of the mission as a focal point in sub-school and departmental meetings where teachers can openly contribute and share ideas. Additionally, the data suggests that teachers would benefit from recognising and celebrating successful teaching practices, aligning with the vision and mission.

Moreover, the findings, supported by extensive literature, suggest that committing more time and resources to goal-setting activities would likely benefit the 'the school' community. Working with the school's current foundational statements to collaboratively establish and sustain achievable, measurable, and data-driven goals may not only promote greater alignment with the school's vision and mission but also enable student outcomes to improve (Vanari & Eisenschmidt, 2022; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

Conclusion

The different motivations, the unique experiences and backgrounds of staff, the variable leadership structures and styles, the levels of teacher stress, and the school climate are some notable elements within schools that impact the direction a school is headed. Foundation statements, however, serve to succinctly unify and communicate the unique values and purpose of a school - providing a beacon of direction and clarity to staff and the broader community. When teachers, leaders and support staff are cognisant and inspired by their purpose and heading, the positive impact on students and the wider community is likely an inevitable outcome. TEACH

> *... foundation statements, however, serve to succinctly unify and communicate the unique values and purpose of a school*

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TEACH[R]

The impact of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation on the wellbeing of secondary teachers in a Christian school context

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Keywords: teacher wellbeing, spiritual behaviours, religious affiliation, spiritual health, stress

Abstract

This research explored and analysed the impact of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation on secondary teacher wellbeing within a Christian school setting. Twenty-six secondary teaching staff completed a digital questionnaire, which asked them to rate their agreeance with statements based on spiritual behaviours, religious affiliations and wellbeing. Five secondary teaching staff further explored their perspectives on these themes through a semi-structured interview. The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential techniques. The investigation highlighted that secondary teachers who demonstrated regular spiritual behaviours or religious affiliation appeared to experience less daily stress than the Australian national average. The analysis also suggested that spiritual behaviours positively impacted secondary teacher wellbeing, regardless of religious affiliation. This research points to exploring spiritual behaviours as a key strategy for enhancing wellbeing in Christian secondary school contexts.

> *. . . a variety of stressors, such as teacher shortages, rapid technological changes and pandemics, have caused some in the profession to suffer in recent years*

Introduction

Some believe that education can play an essential role in forming, transforming, liberating and empowering communities across the globe (Gal & Gan, 2020). Like all indispensable community services, frontline personnel ensure that the aspirational hopes and dreams of philosophers, politicians, and parents become reality through a disciplined and consistent approach (Kalra et al., 2020). A collection of world leaders and revolutionaries believe in s the power of education to influence communities and improve the quality of life and equity for all (Williams, 2019). Nelson Mandela once stated, “Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world” (Mandela, 1990).

Some researchers note that quality education requires knowledgeable, skilled and creative teachers who are healthy and experience high levels of wellbeing (Falecki & Mann, 2021; Filho et al., 2018; Herman et al., 2020). One definition of wellbeing is that it is a state in which an individual comprehends their capabilities, can cope with the everyday stresses of life and work, can work effectively and productively in their employment, and contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2023). While the research indicates a link between teacher wellbeing, productivity and performance, a variety of stressors, such as teacher shortages, rapid technological changes and pandemics, have caused some in the profession to suffer in recent years (Australian Government Department of Education, 2021).

It is suggested that the positive impact that high levels of physical, spiritual and mental health have on employee and company productivity, work satisfaction and product creativity (Hamill, 2019). While employee wellbeing is known to have improved health outcomes for individuals and productivity outcomes for organisations, the literature is imprecise in defining the prioritisation of the health dimensions and promoting spiritual behaviours that enhance spiritual health (Aboobaker, 2022). Increasingly, spiritual health is promoted as a private practice that does not show outwardly or influence others. Unlike other common health dimensions enabled in workplaces, such as physical health through exercise, mental health through counselling services or social health through team outings, spiritual health has long been difficult to explore and promote, or simply ignored for ideological reasons (e.g. Willar’s

Spiritual Knowledge) (Foster & Foster, 2019).

Teaching can be a stressful career choice, and in recent years, it has been reported that over 40% of teachers in Australia may have expressed that they have considered leaving the profession soon (OECD, 2020). A large body of research has indicated that a lack of wellbeing has increased nationwide levels of burnout and fatigue and has reduced teacher resilience to all-time lows (University of South Australia, 2022). It may therefore be important that potential curative and preventative health measures are investigated further.

Schools with a religious affiliation are among the very few remaining faith-based organisations that can promote spiritual behaviours amongst staff. Religious affiliation is defined as the religion to which a person or school nominates that they have an affiliation. This affiliation may include spiritual beliefs or no religious or spiritual beliefs. It is self-assessed and does not measure a quantitative adherence to the beliefs or participation in common practices of a religion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This research project investigates the impact that religious affiliation and spiritual behaviours may have on the wellbeing of secondary school teachers.

Research Questions

The researchers sought to investigate this question: How do spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation reportedly have an impact on secondary teacher wellbeing in Christian schools?

Contributing questions to answer the over-arching question included: Do teachers experience regular indicators of high and low wellbeing? How is wellbeing impacted by high stress? How do spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation impact teacher wellbeing? Do teachers perceive spiritual behaviours as a coping strategy for stress?

Literature Review

Education and the current teacher climate

As above, check how you use/report on previous research. Social research cannot prove or globalise its findings, unless it is using a philosophical or theological claim – which is fine, as long as it is acknowledged as being based on those beliefs – not the 'science'.

[See the suggested edits in the next paragraph as illustrative of being more nuanced {and less grandiose in an assertive sense} in how you use the information that you believe is pertinent to this study]

UNESCO claims that education is a human right that transforms the lives of children and adults, reduces global inequalities and ensures meaningful living (UNESCO, 2023). It is regarded as a vital component of community and global health, with reported notable positive impacts on mental health, morbidity, and mortality rates (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020). For effective global education to occur, the world needs teachers. Historically, teaching has been described as a gratifying occupation for many philosophical and practical reasons, and various teacher studies indicate high levels of workplace satisfaction (Schliecher, 2018). While being a dynamic profession that requires a high level of organisational skill, research and planning capabilities, strong communication skills and curriculum expertise, it is also at its most effective when positive relationships are an evident focus. When relationships between teachers, students and leaders are prioritised, high self-esteem and a sense of purpose are reported by some to be achieved (Kun & Gadanecz, 2019).

Interestingly, a contrasting narrative is suggested to be concurrently true. While teaching can be highly gratifying, a body of current research indicates exceptionally high levels of reported profession-based stress within Australian classrooms (OECD, 2020). Findings from the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey indicated that almost six in ten Australian teachers (58%) feel 'quite a bit' or 'a lot of stress' in their profession, which is considerably more significant than the average of 49% from other OECD countries. Over 20% of teachers also reported wishing to leave the profession in the next five years (OECD, 2020, p. 25). The post-COVID-19 work environment has pushed many teachers to the physical and emotional limit, resulting in record levels of stress leave, burnout syndrome (BOS) and career changes for long and short-term educators (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2023). Teacher distress can be caused by a variety of reasons, including a lack of workplace autonomy, increasing administrative tasks, and changing curriculum expectations (OECD, 2020, p. 27). These stressors often result in teachers experiencing a myriad of unpleasant negative emotions such as irritation, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness (Agyapong et al., 2022). In a variety of academic studies, stress has been proven to decrease a teacher's wellbeing and has been closely associated with career changes away from the teaching profession altogether (Chirico, 2016). Teacher wellbeing needs to be a significant focus of educational research to ensure that teachers are supported with a sustainable method that improves their long-term wellbeing.

An oversight of most modern teacher stress literature is the seemingly obvious separation of work and home life. Unlike other career pathways, many teachers are required to spend hours of their home lives preparing materials for the following academic day. A longitudinal study conducted by

> *While teaching can be highly gratifying, a body of current research indicates exceptionally high levels of reported profession based stress within Australian classrooms*

Weziak-Bialowolska et al. (2020) indicated the necessity for employers to understand the reciprocal relationship between all arenas of an individual's life to ensure that workplaces are designed to promote interventions that actively support employee health (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2020). The study also provided evidence that prioritising wellbeing strategies outside work hours can improve work satisfaction during regular work hours (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2020). The literature indicated a connection between home-life and work-life satisfaction from and to each arena. When an individual's home life is negatively impacted by their work (that is, teachers completing long preparation hours during hours at home), their wellbeing in both domains is negatively impacted (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2020). [This neglects the structural compensation of eight weeks of re-creation and preparation that are given in addition to the four weeks of annual leave not given to any other helping or caring profession]

... in a state of wellbeing, an individual can manage the everyday stresses of life and positively impact their community

Research out of the University of South Australia concluded that the current teacher climate has changed, and excessive stress is a reality. It raised serious concerns about the wellbeing of teachers, with over 45% of teachers indicating they would leave the profession within five years. The increasing complexity of work, lack of resources and support, and a loss of professional recognition, autonomy and stunted wages have significantly impacted the sustainability and effectiveness of the teaching profession (University of South Australia, 2022).

Wellbeing and Stress

Wellbeing is reported in some areas of study as a combination of physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual wellness (Better Health Victoria, 2021). Wellbeing is often described as a blend of feeling well and functioning effectively and efficiently (Ruggeri et al., 2020), but such definitions beg questions such as "What does 'feeling well' mean?" In this paper, teacher wellbeing is defined as: a balanced combination of emotional, physical, social and spiritual factors that contribute to purposeful living and result in high levels of wellbeing, often accompanied by feelings of joy, belonging, and meaning (Carroll 2021). The World Health Organization extends this definition by affirming that in a state of wellbeing, an individual can manage the everyday stresses of life and positively impact their community (World Health Organization, 2021). When employees experience high levels of consistent wellbeing in their workplaces, there are noticeable improvements in productivity, creativity, and positive interactions with other staff (Litchfield et al., 2016). A study by Herman et al. (2020) found that teacher effectiveness intersected directly with their wellbeing, and effective learning environments depend on healthy and happy teachers (Herman et al., 2020). Because wellbeing is a crucial indicator of teacher resilience, motivation, and organisational stability, all strategies that improve teacher wellbeing must be considered (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Physical, mental, and social techniques have been frequently proven in recent research to improve the wellbeing of employees (Fergana State University, 2022; Jnaneswar & Sulphey, 2021; Marquez DX et al., 2020). However, infrequent research explores how spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations impact teacher wellbeing.

Current literature continuously demonstrates the necessity of spiritual health in determining an individual's overall wellbeing (Schwebel, 2017). It also indicates a direct link between spiritual health and employee performance, satisfaction, improved mental health, resilience and enhanced organisational outcomes (Chirico et al., 2023). Current research details the link between spirituality and wellbeing and how employees from various professions have improved wellbeing when their spiritual health is prioritised. Promoting spiritual behaviours should be a foundational framework for supporting employee wellbeing and promoting a healthy work culture. Chirico et al. (2023) also surmised that an effective incorporation of spirituality into the workplace can reduce workplace stress and burnout and improve employees' psychological and physical functioning through spiritual behaviours such as meditation, introspective thinking and yoga (Chirico et al., 2023). This recent research indicates that spiritual behaviours can impact teacher wellbeing.

Spirituality, spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation

Spirituality is described as one of the five significant tenets of health by the World Health Organisation and has had strong religious ties to major world religions for thousands of years (de Brito Sena et al., 2021). In recent times, spirituality has become more broadly described as an individual's search for meaning and purposeful living, ethical decision-making processes and an expression of individual lifestyle and belief frameworks (Pong, 2022). Belief frameworks may also include personal or communal traditions and rituals that influence an individual's daily life. American author and researcher Brené Brown describes spirituality as recognising and celebrating all humans' connection to a power greater than us, grounded in love and compassion (Brown, 2022).

Spiritual behaviours, for this research paper, are defined as dynamic behaviours or rituals

through which an individual or group seeks to connect with a higher power or purpose (Bożek et al., 2020). Traditionally, these are demonstrated through common cultural practices such as prayer, church attendance, spiritual discussions, ethical debates, meditation, singing or worship, service acts, community involvement and sharing, Christian communion, reading holy texts and fasting (Chippewa Valley Technical College, 2021). These behaviours have significant and sacred implications for individuals who practice them. It is worth noting that there is a broad spectrum of practices and regularity of spiritual behaviours amongst adherents. Some may practice spiritual behaviours daily, weekly, monthly, or annually. A variety of research from the Pew Research Centre indicates that more than 50% of all major religion adherents [in the USA?] practise prayer daily, while only 36% attend a religious service weekly, and 33% read a sacred text each week (Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 2022). This study will focus on three spiritual behaviours: prayer communal and private, spiritual conversations and church attendance.

The observance and practice of religious customs and behaviours are common globally and demonstrate an ongoing religious affiliation by adherents. In Australia, research from 2021 suggests that Christians make up 43.9% of the total population, while Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists are around 3% each (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Interestingly, over 38% of Australians do not affiliate with major world religions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). It is well documented that a teacher's personal beliefs and religious alignment have pronounced impacts on their teaching and student learning in the classroom (Nelson & Yang, 2022). While the literature indicates a variety of positive classroom outcomes for teachers who authentically demonstrate their affiliation to a belief system or religion, there is currently a gap in the research on the need for spiritual behaviours to support teacher wellbeing. Complexities in understanding personal faith and spiritual health have often led to it being the most frequently overlooked area of a person's wellbeing (Akbari & Hossaini, 2018).

Literature review summary

The literature indicates a need for further research into the impact of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations on teacher wellbeing. While some studies indicated a positive correlation, ongoing research must be contextualised for Australian classrooms, which have been shown to have higher levels of teacher stress, work hours and burnout than teachers in other OECD countries. From the studies analysed, three main themes are present.

1. Australian teachers are reported as currently suffering from the highest levels of stress and burnout of all OECD nations. Suggested causes include increased working hours, administrative tasks and increased student learning complexities. It can also be inferred that the increasingly secular population of Australia may have presumptuously disposed of spiritual coping strategies that have been vital to wellbeing for millennia.
2. The literature indicates that spiritual practices may produce a variety of benefits for an individual's wellbeing.
3. Further research may help describe whether teachers in Australia benefit from the same detailed benefits the literature indicates when spiritual health is prioritised through behaviours and affiliations.

Methodology

Sample Population

Secondary school staff from a Seventh-day Adventist Christian College located in Australia participated in this research. The campus comprises thirty-six staff members with a male-to-female ratio of 40:60. The school is religiously and ethnically diverse, and employees' ages range from twenty-four to sixty-plus years old. *The Ethics Committee of Avondale University approved this study.*

> *... spiritual practices may produce a variety of benefits for an individual's wellbeing*

Measurement Instruments

A questionnaire and interviews were developed to explore and quantify spiritual behaviours and their impact on participant wellbeing. The digital questionnaire had 16 statements regarding wellbeing, stress, spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations. A 4-point Likert scale was used. The questionnaire was created with two major, distinctive sections. Questions one, two and three assessed consistency with the broader literature about current levels of perceived teacher stress and the impact that stress had on wellbeing and teaching performance. The second section of the questionnaire, questions four to sixteen, focused on the impact of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with five randomly selected staff from different year levels and subject areas who may or may not regularly engage in spiritual behaviours at work. These teachers were asked 12 open-ended questions that explored their perceptions of personal wellbeing, stressors they experience at work, spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation. The responses were collated using thematic techniques to discern common spiritual behaviours and their perceived impact on wellbeing.

All secondary staff received an email inviting them to complete the digital questionnaire. The response rate for the questionnaire was 74% (26 teachers out of 36). A name-generator application randomly selected five teachers who agreed to participate in the qualitative interviews.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data from the questionnaire calculated frequencies and percentages for responses to each statement using Microsoft Excel. Qualitative interview data were analysed using WordCloud software, which indicated consistent words, themes and phrases.

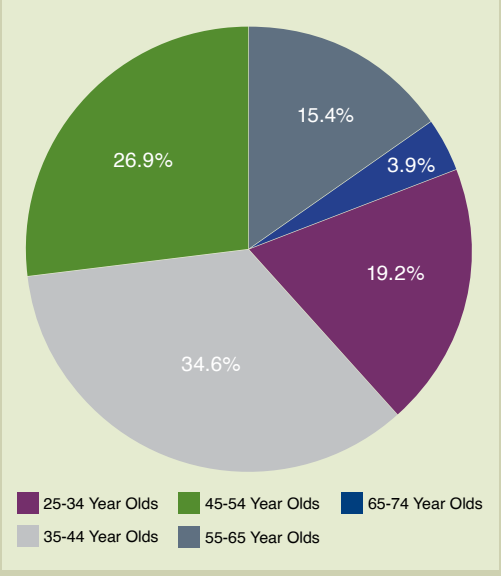
Results

From the twenty-six responses, 73% of respondents were female, and 27% were male. Religious affiliations comprised 73% Seventh-day Adventist Christians, 20% Christian (Other denominations) and 7% non-religious. The age of respondents varied and showed a range of between 18 to 74 years of age (see Figure 1).

Table 1 reveals the scores for each questionnaire statement. Scores for agree and strongly agree were aggregated to reveal trends, with 66% of respondents agreeing that "I regularly feel high levels of stress as a teacher," showing alignment with the wider teaching environment. Similarly, over 58% of teachers agreed that "workplace stressors had negatively impacted their wellbeing." Interestingly, the response ratios to question three indicate that a slight majority of teachers (53%) do not believe their indicated stress levels reduced their teaching performance.

> *. . . a significant percentage of respondents prioritise their spiritual health in their health continuum and use spiritual behaviours to manage stress.*

Figure 1: Questionnaire Age Demographic Data



Throughout section two of the questionnaire (Q4 to 16), the responses detailed a significant engagement with spiritual behaviours and gratitude towards their own and corporately encouraged spiritual behaviours. Responses to questions 4, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15 and 16 indicate that a significant portion of the respondents agreed with statements that frame the notion that spirituality, religious affiliations and spiritual behaviours positively impact teacher wellbeing. These questions included exploring positive impacts outside of an individual's spiritual health, social health (through peer interactions), and mental health. Question 13 demonstrated that the vast majority (88%) regularly use spiritual behaviours to manage stress.

The quantitative data revealed that 100% of the teachers believe *spiritual behaviours positively impact my wellbeing* (Q9) and that their *wellbeing is improved when they are spiritually active compared to when they are not* (Q14). The vast majority (92%) stated that spiritual behaviours also improved their interactions with peers and colleagues (Q10). However, a lesser proportion of 88% *use spiritual behaviours to manage stress*.

Not all teachers practise the same spiritual behaviours. Over 90% of teachers responded that they pray regularly at home, whereas a lower rate of 77% (a difference of 13%) pray at work and participate in staff worship. The rate declined to 73% involvement in a religious community outside of work.

It can be summarised that a prominent portion of respondents recognised high stress levels in their teaching roles, with a majority agreeing that work-based stress negatively impacted their wellbeing. Sixty-seven per cent also indicated that "My wellbeing has been consistently high in 2023" – how do you reconcile this?

While religious affiliations and spiritual behaviours vary among respondents in type and frequency, most indicated that various behaviours positively impact their wellbeing and social interactions. The data indicates that a significant percentage of respondents prioritise their spiritual health in their health continuum and use spiritual behaviours to manage stress.

The qualitative data was analysed, coded and collated using Microsoft Excel. The word-volume count, as seen in Table 2, was then used to identify valuable statements from the interviews.

All five Interviewees mentioned the phrase 'helpful' to describe a positive connection between spirituality, spiritual behaviours and wellbeing. It was the most frequently expressed word throughout the

Table 1: *Questionnaire Data from Secondary Teachers Regarding the Impact of Spiritual Behaviours on Teacher Wellbeing*

Questionnaire Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1 – Regular high stress as a teacher	9%	26%	35%	30%
2 – Work stress impacts wellbeing negatively	19%	23%	27%	31%
3 – Stress impacts teaching performance negatively	15%	38%	31%	15%
4 – Spiritual behaviours are encouraged and supported	0%	4%	50%	46%
5 – I pray regularly at home	4%	4%	27%	65%
6 – I pray regularly at work	8%	8%	27%	50%
7 – I am engaged in staff worship regularly	8%	15%	31%	46%
8 – I am actively involved in a religious community	12%	15%	23%	50%
9 – Spiritual behaviours positively impact my wellbeing.	0%	0%	31%	69%
10 – Spiritual behaviours impact my interactions positively	0%	8%	31%	62%
11 – My spiritual beliefs are supported at work	0%	4%	46%	50%
12 – Connection to peers through spiritual behaviours	0%	15%	42%	42%
13 – I used spiritual behaviours to manage stress	8%	4%	50%	38%
14 – My wellbeing is better when I am spiritually active	0%	0%	31%	69%
15 – My spiritual health is my first health priority	4%	31%	35%	31%
16 – My wellbeing has been consistently high in 2023	8%	27%	42%	15%

Interview respondents regularly referenced support and community as two critical components of spirituality,

Table 2: *Word-Volume Analysis from Qualitative Interviews*

Word	Volume	Percentage of the Major Identified Themes
Helps/Helpful	49	14.98%
Support	46	14.07%
Faith	43	13.15%
Spiritual	37	11.31%
Prayer/Pray	34	10.40%
Community	41	12.54%
Church	23	7.03%
Positive	12	3.67%
Stress/Stressful	27	8.26%
Reflection	15	4.59%
Totals	**327**	**100%**

qualitative data. Teacher One referred to this term when they stated, “Spiritual behaviours do have a significant impact on my wellbeing. For me, they provide a sense of purpose and a support system that helps navigate the challenging moments in life,” and “it helps me stay grounded and resilient when facing my teaching day gets stressful.” Teacher Two added similar notions when they expressed, “I’m not spiritual, but the school is. If I were, it would probably bring me more purpose and help me find more meaning in my teaching.” Interestingly, teachers without religious affiliations still considered that spiritual behaviours could help them find more meaning in their teaching. Another teacher mentioned, “It helps me manage stress and know my value. Additionally, my church focuses a lot on health, which helps me make better lifestyle choices.”

Figure 2 shows the collective distribution of key phrases in a WordCloud format after being analysed using software from FreeWordCloudGenerator.com.

Interview respondents regularly referenced support and community as two critical components of spirituality, indicating a positive link to wellbeing.



The most regularly identified spiritual behaviours were prayer, church attendance, faith-based conversations and reflection

When asked how spiritual practices impact interactions between colleagues, Teacher Three stated, "As a Christian, I try to be empathetic and supportive of other teachers. I feel this support for each other fosters positive relationships and allows us to be better teachers." This is like Teacher Four, who noted, "We all got together and offered support, prayers, and listened to each other. It was amazing." The data also showed that stress was a consistent theme of the interviews, but that spiritual behaviours were often referenced as coping strategies to manage stress effectively.

The most regularly identified spiritual behaviours were prayer, church attendance, faith-based conversations and reflection or meditation (religious and non-religious). All interviewees mentioned that spiritual behaviours were supported and encouraged in the school's context. Teacher Five stated, "In our school, we often come together for prayer at special times, during class or in morning worship." This is a similar notion shared by Teacher One: "Our school encourages teachers to actively engage in prayer, reflection, and discussions about faith."

Keywords, phrases and sentiment from the interviews were encoded into five themes (see Table 3) with frequency recorded.

Engagement with Spiritual Behaviours and Spiritual Behaviours (positive link to wellbeing) were most frequently (12 each) referenced in the responses from the interviewees, followed closely by the Influence of Spirituality on Daily Life & Purpose (11) and Stress Management Strategies That Include Spiritual Behaviours (10). While mentioned by each interviewee, Religious Affiliations (positive link to wellbeing) was less frequently referenced.

Interviewees consistently emphasised the use of spiritual behaviours to deal with the ongoing stress of teaching and the many challenging components of the role. An interviewee explained, "Teaching can be demanding, and there are moments of stress. However, my faith and spiritual practices often help me manage stress effectively."

Regular participation in staff worship was a spiritual behaviour established at the school that was identified as helpful to sustaining wellbeing. An interviewee stated, "We pray together every morning as staff. Regardless of our religious affiliations, we are all involved in some way. I think this strengthens our Christian culture and joint focus on values like kindness, empathy and respect."

The results of this investigation have indicated that spiritual behaviours can positively impact the wellbeing of this sample of secondary teachers. Both religious and non-religious staff members noted the benefit of spiritual behaviours on their wellbeing and that of other teachers. Prayer, church attendance, meditation and mindfulness were perceived by all interviewees to have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. The data also indicated that most teachers use spiritual practises to manage stress and support their colleagues and community.

Discussion

This study investigated and quantified the perceived impact of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations on the wellbeing of a sample of Australian secondary

Table 3: *Thematic encoding of interview data regarding the impact of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliation on teacher wellbeing*

Thematic encoding	Int. 1	Int. 2	Int. 3	Int. 4	Int. 5	TOTAL	Average
1: Engagement with Spiritual Behaviours	4	0	3	3	2	12	2.4
3: Spiritual Behaviours (positive link to wellbeing)	4	2	2	2	2	12	2.4
5: Influence of Spirituality on Daily Life & Purpose	3	2	1	3	2	11	2.2
4: Stress Management Strategies That Include Spiritual Behaviours	3	0	1	4	2	10	2.0
2: Religious Affiliations (positive link to wellbeing)	2	1	1	2	1	7	1.4
Totals	**16**	**5**	**8**	**14**	**9**	**52**	**2.08**

teachers working in a Christian school.

The quantitative and qualitative data analysis demonstrated a clear link to a growing collection of current literature that suggests teachers are highly stressed (McCarthy, 2019; University of South Australia, 2022). The questionnaire data in Table 1 identified that over 65% of teachers were regularly under 'high-stress levels' in their work environment. A further 58% also indicated that this stress 'negatively impacts their wellbeing'. While the questionnaire did not explore the variety of reasons for these stress impacts, the interviews gave clear insights that aligned with prominent research from the University of South Australia in 2022. As explored in the literature review, this research showed similar statistics of over 47% of teachers being 'stressed a lot' and 57% wishing they had 'more support and training' (University of South Australia, 2022). A further 66% of teachers noted negative emotional and social impacts on their health from work-related stressors (University of South Australia, 2022). The questionnaire results are consistent with the literature and align with *Theme 1* (of the literature review), which detailed that Australian teachers are highly stressed, and these stressors negatively impact wellbeing.

All teachers surveyed acknowledged the benefits of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations, even if they do not consider themselves spiritual or practise these identified behaviours (see Table 3, Code 3). This notion aligns with research conducted by Chirico (2016), who illustrated a strong correlation between spiritual practices and improved teacher wellbeing.

A 2019 study by Villani et al., on the impact of the role of spirituality and religiosity on the wellbeing of individuals, also found that holding beliefs with a firm conviction, whether related to the existence or non-existence of God, creates a beneficial outcome that may improve the wellbeing and remove cognitive biases (Villani et al., 2019). It was concluded that spirituality had a notable impact on the wellbeing of most individuals due to the common human narrative that searches for the meaning and purpose of life, interconnectedness with other humans and eventual life improvement (Villani et al., 2019). Notably, the data demonstrated that while teachers understand the multiplicity of spiritual behaviours' benefits, they do not always practise them. A collection of staff responded that they do not pray, attend church or engage with staff worship regularly (see questions 5-8, Table 1). A variety of complex variables impact teachers' ability to access and implement strategies that are proven to support long-term wellbeing (Gearhart et al., 2022). It was surmised that personal factors such as 'feeling guilty for taking time off to focus on their wellbeing' were vital in preventing effective use of wellbeing strategies (Gearhart et al., 2022). Environmental factors like lack of quiet or available facilities also prevented teachers from implementing healthy strategies they knew would improve their wellbeing. In most scenarios, overwhelming and unattainable workloads subdued a teacher's desire to be effective (Longmuir et al., 2022). Other research indicated that regular contradictions from leaders and a lack of autonomy in decision-making processes reduced the likelihood of staff accessing wellbeing supports (Nwoko et al., 2023).

The significant findings of the questionnaire data found an overwhelmingly positive perception of spiritual behaviours on wellbeing, with 100% of respondents stating they agreed it had a positive impact on their wellbeing (see Table 1). While spiritual behaviours can be different between religious and non-religious individuals, the qualitative

> *All teachers surveyed acknowledged the benefits of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations*

data suggested the common behaviours include prayer, church attendance, mindfulness, meditation (individually through Bible reading and guided using podcasts on Spotify) and spiritual conversations (data observed in Table 1, Table 2 and Figure 2).

Like all health-improving strategies, spiritual behaviours may be impacted by a lack of awareness or implementation due to time-resource problems, where teaching staff do not feel they have the time to invest in beneficial strategies due to workload and administrative demands (Brady & Wilson, 2020). The questionnaire also exhibited that while teachers note spiritual behaviours as beneficial for their wellbeing, they are often not the health dimension of priority for teachers (question 15). Recent research indicates that since wellbeing has become a focus and concern for modern organisations, funding has been seen to promote mental health initiatives (Flores et al., 2022). While mental health is a prominent factor in the wellbeing of teachers, it is unwise to discern that it is the only critical dimension (Najafi et al., 2022). A change from a unidimensional understanding of health to a consideration of the complex multidimensional spectrum of health is prevalent in the wellbeing research, which promotes that every employee should experience physical, mental, spiritual and social wellbeing in their workplaces (Nohilly & Tynan, 2019). The data showed that 35% of secondary teachers revealed that spiritual health is not their priority health dimension, while 65% agreed that it was their health priority. This representation appears to be overestimated concerning the broader education research based on the Christian context of this Christian school. Spiritual behaviours are essential for some teachers in managing workplace stress, but they are not consistently the first strategy in minimising symptoms and pursuing wellbeing for all teachers.

“This data identified a positive association between spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations and the wellbeing of secondary teachers.”

This study provides some initial insight into a gap in teacher wellbeing literature. The findings significantly contribute to the literature by providing an evidence-based data set that can encourage teaching staff to trial spiritual behaviours during times of stress to improve their wellbeing. It also highlighted the importance of spirituality for all individuals, not just teachers who demonstrated a religious affiliation. The substantial evidence collected in this study aligns with theme three from the literature review and details an evident benefit for teacher wellbeing when spiritual behaviours are implemented and religious affiliations are evident. The literature does, however, note the challenge of implementing positive changes from research conducted in this area due to the ongoing secularisation of the Australian population (Ebejer, 2018).

Conclusion

The small-scale size and religious context of this study limit the application of this research to the broader secondary education context. However, the mixed-method approach identified some basic descriptive numerical data and some qualitative data that depict a positive perception and implementation of spiritual behaviours in the lives of many secondary teachers. It also detailed a shared understanding of the benefits of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations, especially during times of stress, for religious-aligned teachers and those not affiliated with any religion. This evidence aligns with current literature that indicates explicit wellbeing benefits for all individuals who practise spiritual behaviours, especially those who work in high-stress environments like secondary teaching (Bożek et al., 2020).

This data identified a positive association between spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations and the wellbeing of secondary teachers. This research is not an endpoint for understanding how to manage stress effectively in the teaching profession, but the beginning of a new chapter of wellbeing research. Understanding the importance of prioritising a holistic understanding of health, which incorporates strategies for all health dimensions, is essential to transforming the education landscape and empowering teachers to become increasingly resilient, positive and evidence-based in their practice. The prioritisation of spiritual health through spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations must be considered a legitimate stress-management strategy for secondary teachers.

Recommendations and Future Research Implications

Based on the discussion, it is suggested that this research is used as contextual evidence for considering the many benefits of spiritual behaviours and religious affiliations and applying strategies that bolster the wellbeing of secondary teaching staff. It is recommended that the following be considered as discussion points amongst leaders in their schools:

1. Schools and educational leaders regularly encourage teachers to explore and engage with spiritual beliefs and create inviting physical spaces for staff to practise spiritual behaviours privately and communally. This can be managed explicitly through times of morning or afternoon personal or communal reflection, prayer, or invitation to communal worship on weekends or weeknights. This is a key strategy for coping with stress and finding meaning in teaching and life.
2. Health care and spiritual leaders must be

prioritised in educational funding to provide ongoing support and education for all staff to empower teachers to feel an increased sense of belonging and meaning in their work. This may improve relationships between religious organisations like churches and community groups, providing expertise outside of teaching and various perspectives that may benefit stressed teachers. Spiritual support may also include an ongoing mentoring program that focuses on more than just the academic program of schools, but the holistic development of the teacher.

3. The final recommendation is for non-religious schools to consider the positive relationship between spiritual behaviours and teacher wellbeing and contemplate ways to encourage teachers to consider their spiritual health, even outside of common religious practice. This could include mindfulness, meditation or spiritually driven conversations.

This research may help to extend the breadth of wellbeing research as applied in school contexts. In an era of some serious concern for teacher wellbeing, job sustainability and tenure, this research may assist in advocating the wellbeing benefits of spiritual behaviours and belonging to a religious or spiritual community. TEACH

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TEACH[R]

Unpacking the influences on teacher wellbeing in a faith-based school system

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Keywords: teacher wellbeing, workload, school leadership, school climate, staff relationships, faith-based schools, spiritual focus, Adventist education

Abstract

What actually helps and harms teacher wellbeing day to day, and does working in a faith-based school change the answer? This article reports the lived detail behind those questions, drawing on a mixed-methods study of teachers in the Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) system of schools. Survey responses from 364 teachers and semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers were analysed to identify the specific influences teachers perceive as shaping their wellbeing. Workload and time dominated the negative influences, followed by climate and leadership, while supportive staff relationships were the single largest positive influence, alongside leadership, a spiritual focus, and feeling that one's impact is valued. The study also surfaced a striking disconnect between what teachers prioritise for their wellbeing and what they believe their leaders prioritise. Most distinctively, working in a faith-based school emerged as a double-edged influence, offering a powerful sense of shared belief, community and calling while also generating blurred boundaries, pressure to conform, and an unspoken additional workload for staff who share the school's faith. Unpacking these influences offers school leaders a grounded picture of where wellbeing is won and lost.

Research connecting faith and wellbeing is limited and tends to examine the role of spirituality in individual aspects of wellbeing

Introduction

Teachers in the twenty-first century require high levels of physical, social and emotional energy to cope with an ever-expanding role (Education Support Partnership, 2019; Agyapong et al., 2022). That role now includes more classroom duties and administrative responsibilities than ever before, and the expansion has coincided with a significant decline in teacher wellbeing (Ozturk et al., 2024; Viac & Fraser, 2020; Santosham & Sudhakaran, 2020). Teachers report the highest levels of occupational stress and burnout of any profession (Beames et al., 2023; OECD, 2020; Falecki & Mann, 2021), and more than one in four leave within their first five years (Black Dog Institute, 2023; Carroll et al., 2022). This matters for students as well as teachers, because teachers are the most important in-school factor contributing to student success (Tavares et al., 2024; Viac & Fraser, 2020; Hattie, 2013).

Much of the existing research stops at this general diagnosis. It identifies broad influences, such as workload, school climate, teaching efficacy and behaviour management (UNESCO, 2024; Ozturk et al., 2024; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), but offers school leaders limited guidance on what these influences actually look like in their own settings. There is a particular gap when it comes to faith-based schools. Research connecting faith and wellbeing is limited and tends to examine the role of spirituality in individual aspects of wellbeing, such as resilience and stress (Chakradhar et al., 2022; Mamta & Singh, 2022), rather than the broader experience of working in a faith-based environment.

This article sets out to unpack the influences on teacher wellbeing as teachers themselves describe them, within the specific context of Adventist Schools Australia (ASA). ASA oversees Seventh-day Adventist schools across Australia, educating approximately 17,000 students and employing over 1,200 teachers. The aim is not to rank abstract factors but to give those factors texture: to show what teachers mean when they say workload, or leadership, or a spiritual focus is shaping how they feel about their work. Three questions guide the discussion. What do teachers perceive as negatively influencing their wellbeing? What do they perceive as positively influencing it? And what difference, for better and worse, does working in a faith-based school make?

Method in brief

The study used a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Phase One was an online survey completed by 364 of approximately 1,200 ASA teachers. A response rate of roughly 30 per cent, including three open-ended questions about teachers' own wellbeing and its influences. Phase Two comprised of semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers, selected through criterion purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) to represent a range of ages, genders, experience levels and locations across eight of the nine ASA regions.

Open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with responses coded and refined into substantive themes. Quotations below are drawn from survey responses and from interview respondents.

What teachers perceive as harming their wellbeing

When 317 teachers described what they believed was negatively affecting their wellbeing at school, five themes emerged: workload and time, climate, leadership, staff relationships, and behaviour management. The distribution was telling. Workload and time accounted for 137 references (44 per cent), climate for 55 (18 per cent), leadership for 53 (17 per cent), staff relationships for 28 (10 per cent), and behaviour management for 20 (7 per cent). These were also the longest written responses in the survey, suggesting the depth of feeling attached to them.

Workload and time

Workload and time was, by a clear margin, the heaviest negative influence. Teachers described excessive tasks, tight deadlines and the steady accumulation of administrative requirements that pulled them away from teaching. Their language was blunt: "workload and deadlines are always number one in terms of negative impacts on the teaching profession", and frustration with "too much of an emphasis on worthless paperwork and tick-the-box bureaucratic expectations that increase the workload unnecessarily". This echoes the wider literature, in which unmanageable workload is consistently identified as the single largest influence on teacher wellbeing and the most common reason teachers give for considering leaving (McCallum et al., 2017; Birchall, 2021).

Two further dimensions sat within the theme. The first was a perceived lack of support for managing the load, captured in comments about "unrealistic expectations regarding the amount of time it takes to complete non-face-to-face aspects of teaching" and "the apparent lack of interest in employing additional staff to reduce workload". The second was time itself: teachers spoke of being "time poor" and of "the constant struggle to meet demands within limited time frames", with some honestly naming their own time management as a contributor.

Climate and leadership

Climate and leadership were closely linked in teachers' accounts and together formed the next tier of negative influence. On climate, teachers pointed to disengaged colleagues and to systemic issues in the wider school community, describing a "school culture and lack of trust" and meetings that "are lectures and info dumps that could have been an email" with "no collaboration or dialogue". In the interviews, teachers reached for stronger language still, using terms such as toxic and dysfunctional to describe schools with an unhealthy climate.

On leadership, three sub-themes recurred: feeling unsupported, undervalued, and poorly communicated with. Teachers described asking for help at "breaking point" only to be told to solve the problem themselves, and a sense that "management does not value our time and workload stress", being "too focused on ticking boxes and getting things done so it looks good on paper". Communication failures, from "lack of communication and clear expectations from administration" to leaders who "don't answer the hard questions honestly", eroded trust. These findings sit comfortably alongside research showing that perceived leadership behaviour is related to teacher wellbeing, with supportive, transparent leadership enhancing it and disengaged leadership undermining it (Van der Vyver et al., 2020; Griffith, 2004).

Climate and leadership were closely linked in teachers' accounts and together formed the next tier of negative influence.

Staff relationships and behaviour management

Though less frequently cited, two further themes mattered. Strained staff relationships harmed wellbeing through a loss of belonging, with teachers describing "cliques", feeling "not part of the in-group", and colleagues "discouraging people that breed a virus of negativity in the workplace". Behaviour management harmed wellbeing chiefly where the school lacked a consistent approach, leaving teachers without "a working discipline system that is understood and reinforced by staff, administration, parents, and students". In both cases the harm came less from isolated incidents than from the absence of shared, supported systems.

What teachers perceive as supporting their wellbeing

Asked what positively influenced their wellbeing,

311 teachers responded, and four themes emerged: staff relationships, leadership, spiritual focus, and feeling that one's impact is valued. Staff relationships dominated, accounting for 163 references (52 per cent), followed by leadership (54, or 17 per cent), spiritual focus (41, or 13 per cent), and impact valued (35, or 11 per cent). Notably, the same two themes, staff relationships and leadership, appeared on both the negative and positive lists, underlining that these are influences capable of cutting either way.

Supportive relationships and valued impact

More than half of respondents located their positive wellbeing in their colleagues. Teachers wrote of "the teachers bonding together and supporting each other both in and outside of school" and of a "feeling of camaraderie and being part of a team" that one described as "priceless". Friendship featured strongly, with "close colleagues that are now friends" providing both practical and emotional support. This aligns with the view that relationships are a psychological need and an essential factor for mental health and wellbeing (Falecki & Mann, 2021).

Closely related was the sense of having one's impact valued. Teachers spoke of "genuine thankfulness and acknowledgement of successes" and of "feeling that my efforts are appreciated and valued", alongside the empowerment that comes from autonomy: "I have a lot of freedom and control over my department and what we do." Recognition and affirmation, the research suggests, lift wellbeing through improvements to job satisfaction and a sense of efficacy (Vo et al., 2024; Beltman et al., 2011).

> *Where leadership supported wellbeing, teachers described two things: connection and character.*

Leadership as a positive force

Where leadership supported wellbeing, teachers described two things: connection and character. Connection appeared in accounts of an "excellent principal, her door is always open, approachable in any situation", and of leaders who recognise and value staff expertise. Character appeared in references to leadership that is "well-structured and visionary", that develops "shared understanding of expectations", and that shows empathy by telling staff "to take a break if they identify that we need it". The positive and negative accounts of leadership converge on the same qualities: support, communication, and being valued. What distinguishes a wellbeing-enhancing leader from a wellbeing-eroding one is the presence or absence of these qualities, not the role itself.

The influences teachers carry with them

Not every influence on wellbeing originates inside the school. Teachers also pointed to non-job-related factors they bring with them, which a school can do little to control yet which shape how teachers experience their work. Three stood out in the interviews: personality, family and personal relationships, and physical and mental health.

On personality, teachers were reflective about how their own dispositions affected their wellbeing. Perfectionism was raised repeatedly as a trait that raises stress and makes it harder to balance work and personal life. Teachers recognised that the same conscientiousness that makes them effective can also leave them unable to let go of tasks, a tension the wider literature notes when it observes that personality precedes and significantly shapes workplace wellbeing (Espinoza-Diaz et al., 2023).

Family and personal relationships were described as a double-edged influence in their own right. They provide essential emotional and practical support, but they can also introduce stressors and time pressures that follow teachers into the classroom. As Beltman (2023) observes, personal relationships can both buffer and burden teacher wellbeing. Several teachers described the difficulty of carrying family responsibilities alongside an already demanding workload, with the two competing for the same limited reserves of energy. Physical and mental health completed the picture, with teachers calling for better support systems to help them manage the physical and emotional demands of the role before those demands tip into ill health. Resilience emerged as the trait teachers most associated with sustaining their wellbeing, alongside an honest acknowledgement that many of them tend to worry, hinting at a moderate baseline of anxiety running beneath an otherwise positive outlook.

A disconnect between teachers and leaders

One of the study's most significant findings was not about any single influence but about a gap in perception. Teachers were asked to rate the importance of wellbeing influences both for themselves and as they believed their school leaders rated them. The two pictures diverged sharply. Teachers rated the influences highly overall, with a mean of 3.57 on a four-point scale, but believed their leaders rated the same influences far lower, at a mean of 2.80.

The order of priorities also differed. Teachers placed the operational processes of the school, including workload and behaviour management, at the top of their own list. Yet they believed their leaders placed the spiritual focus of the school first and the operational processes much lower. The implication is uncomfortable but important: teachers suspect that leaders do not fully grasp the extent to which workload and day-to-day school

processes affect wellbeing, and that leadership may over-emphasise faith-based factors relative to the practical concerns teachers themselves prioritise. This is not a rejection of the spiritual dimension, which teachers valued, but a plea for it not to crowd out attention to workload, climate and the daily experience of teaching. The disconnect points to a clear need for open dialogue between leaders and teachers, so that wellbeing efforts are aimed where teachers actually feel the pressure.

The double edge of a faith-based school

The most distinctive contribution of this study lies in what teachers said about working in a faith-based school specifically. Here the influence was genuinely double-edged. The same environment that gave many teachers a profound sense of purpose and belonging also generated pressures that, for some, became reasons to leave.

Shared belief, community and calling

On the positive side, teachers described two related benefits: shared beliefs and values, and alignment with the school's mission. Shared belief created a climate of mutual understanding. One teacher explained that the environment helps colleagues "support each other and find strength in our shared beliefs", while another valued being able to "be open and not feel ashamed to talk about Christian values". Shared practices such as staff worship were singled out: "Going to worship each morning is one of the reasons I work in an Adventist school". Another teacher reflected that praying together and knowing "we're on the same page as our colleagues spiritually" was "probably more important than some of them think or realise".

Alignment with mission produced a powerful sense of calling that sustained teachers through difficult days. As one put it, "we are here to serve and with the mission. We are here to give back; otherwise, you would not be with noisy, rowdy kids all day". Others spoke of fundamentally believing in "the whole mission of what we do" and of feeling "called to do what you're doing" with "passion and that purpose and that mission focus". This sense of calling gave daily work a meaning that ordinary job satisfaction does not capture, and it enhanced wellbeing through fulfilment and commitment.

Blurred boundaries, pressure and hidden workload

On the negative side, three themes emerged: blurred boundaries, pressure to conform, and an additional, often unspoken, workload. The blurring of church and school life was the most widely felt. As one teacher observed, "when people are involved in church and school, they work six days a week, if not more". The overlap reached into personal time, with parents raising school matters during church services. One teacher admitted, "I'm guilty of this being a factor for me avoiding going to church sometimes", and another noted that some staff "won't go to church because they don't want to see parents". The same overlap could erode professional respect, as parents and students "see them as a friend rather than… someone that they need to be showing respect to".

Pressure to conform formed the second theme. Teachers described an expectation to maintain "a servant mindset at all times" that "can be to a detriment", and warned that the language of calling could be misused: schools must be careful not to "use this sense of calling into guilting teachers or manipulating teachers to do more than what they should".

The third theme was an additional workload for staff who share the school's faith. In this Adventist context, Adventist teachers were repeatedly asked to take on extra religious responsibilities such as leading chapel, preaching, or teaching Bible classes, often regardless of an already full load. As one teacher explained, "if there is… Bible to teach in high school, they will not ask a non-Adventist teacher, but they will ask the Adventist teacher, even if they have a full load". The expectation extended beyond school

"On the positive side, teachers described two related benefits: shared beliefs and values, and alignment with the school's mission."

Table 1: *The double-edged influence of working in a faith-based school.*

Positive influences	Negative influences
Shared beliefs and values create a supportive community offering emotional and spiritual support.	Blurred boundaries between church and school extend working hours and intrude on personal life.
Alignment with mission instils a sense of purpose and calling that sustains teachers.	Pressure to conform to religious expectations and maintain a constant servant mindset.
A spiritual climate of worship, prayer and shared purpose enhances belonging.	Additional, often unrecognised workload placed specifically on faith-aligned staff.

into church ministry roles, and crucially this extra contribution was frequently unrecognised by either school or church. One teacher could "think of four or five Adventist staff that have left because they have felt unsupported, unheard, that the work demands and the unspoken expectation outside of work have become too much".

This double edge is the heart of the matter for faith-based schools. The spiritual dimension is not a neutral backdrop; it is among the most powerful influences on teacher wellbeing in either direction. Existing research has tended to celebrate the positive side, noting that faith-inspired leadership prioritises compassion, community and purpose (Asha et al., 2023), while saying little about the costs. The teachers in this study made both sides visible.

> *... teachers were quick to identify what would improve their wellbeing, and their suggestions were practical rather than abstract.*

What teachers said would help

Across the interviews, teachers were quick to identify what would improve their wellbeing, and their suggestions were practical rather than abstract. They wanted clear guidelines on what counts as a reasonable workload, and the streamlining of administrative tasks that take them away from teaching. They wanted proactive and confidential mental health support, having found the existing counselling vouchers stigmatising and insufficient, particularly in a close faith-based setting where confidentiality is harder to protect. They wanted consistent, whole-school behaviour management so that no teacher feels left to manage complex behaviour alone. And they wanted leaders who communicate transparently and visibly value their contribution.

In the faith-based domain specifically, teachers asked for two things. First, that the genuine benefits of shared belief and mission be protected and strengthened through opportunities for staff spiritual connection. Second, that the costs be addressed directly: that religious responsibilities be distributed equitably and recognised, and that clear boundaries be respected between professional duties and personal church involvement, regardless of a teacher's faith alignment. Encouragingly, many teachers reported being satisfied with their wellbeing and finding joy in faith-based teaching, which offers schools a foundation of strength to build upon.

Discussion and conclusion

Unpacking the influences on teacher wellbeing in this faith-based system reveals a layered picture. The familiar pressures of the profession, above all workload, are present and acute, just as they are elsewhere. So too are the familiar supports, with relationships and recognition lifting wellbeing wherever they are present. Leadership and climate cut both ways, helping or harming depending on whether teachers experience support, communication and value. None of this is unique to faith-based schools.

What is distinctive is the spiritual dimension and the disconnect in perception. The spiritual character of a faith-based school is a genuine wellbeing asset, offering belonging and a sense of calling that secular settings cannot easily replicate. Yet that same character can blur boundaries, exert pressure, and load extra and unrecognised work onto faith-aligned staff. Meanwhile, teachers believe their leaders over-weight the spiritual and under-weight the practical, the reverse of teachers' own priorities. Closing that gap, through honest dialogue and through interventions aimed where teachers actually feel the strain, is the central task this study identifies.

These findings are drawn from a single faith-based system at one point in time and from teachers alone, so they should be read as a detailed account of one context rather than a universal map. Even so, they offer school leaders something valuable: a grounded sense of where wellbeing is won and lost in their schools. Wellbeing is not improved by slogans or generic programs. It is improved by attending to the specific influences teachers name, by protecting what genuinely sustains them, and by addressing the costs that, in faith-based schools, can hide behind the very mission that gives the work its meaning. TEACH

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TEACH[R]

Reframing Mission in Christian Schools: Philosophical and Educational Implications from Japan

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Keywords: Christian education, mission reaffirmation, existential philosophy, Japan

Abstract

This study examines how Christian schools in postwar Japan can reaffirm their founding mission through the existential philosophy of Akiko Ikeda (1960–2007). Drawing on philosophical, historical, and organisational perspectives, it develops the concept of "existential mission reaffirmation", which connects individual reflection with institutional renewal. By interpreting Ikeda's thought as a resource for reengaging fundamental questions of life, death, and meaning, the paper argues that mission should be understood not as a static identity but as an ongoing process of inquiry. The study further explores implications for educational practice and institutional evaluation, suggesting that mission reaffirmation can be integrated into teaching, cocurricular activities, and quality assurance systems in Christian education.

"The mission of Christian schools in postwar Japan has been repeatedly and persistently challenged by secularisation, demographic decline, and increasing religious pluralism."

1. Introduction

The mission of Christian schools in postwar Japan has been repeatedly and persistently challenged by secularisation, demographic decline, and increasing religious pluralism. Once established as institutions that embodied, in concrete educational practice, the theological and pedagogical ideals of their founding churches, many of these schools now find themselves navigating a landscape in which their identity is questioned, diluted, or redefined in the face of powerful external pressures. At the same time, institutional evaluation and accreditation systems—designed to ensure accountability, transparency, and quality—have introduced additional demands that often shift the focus from existential and theological reflection to compliance with bureaucratic metrics and technocratic indicators (Amano & Poole, 2005). Against this backdrop, a pressing question arises: how might Christian schools reaffirm their mission not merely as a matter of organisational survival or brand maintenance, but as a matter of existential significance that animates the daily life of the institution?

In addressing this question, the work of Japanese philosopher Akiko Ikeda (1960–2007) provides an unexpected yet fruitful theoretical foundation. Ikeda was not a traditional academic philosopher but a public intellectual and writer who sought to bring philosophy directly into the lives of ordinary readers. Her central insistence was that philosophy is not a specialised discipline restricted to the academy but a practice of thinking for oneself—especially in relation to fundamental questions of life and death. Ikeda's relentless questioning—What is death? What is the self? What is the meaning of existence?—resonates strongly (Ikeda, 2003, 2009a, 2009b) with the theological concerns of Christian schools, which have historically grounded their educational mission in the belief in eternal life, the dignity of the human person before God, and the responsibility to cultivate free and responsible persons capable of moral discernment.

By positioning Ikeda's existential philosophy as a lens for examining organisational mission, this paper argues that Christian schools can rediscover the meaning of their founding ideals with renewed depth. Rather than treating mission statements as static slogans or as external markers of identity, schools may approach them as existential questions that invite students, faculty, and administrators to engage in reflective self-examination. In this sense, the reaffirmation of mission becomes not simply an administrative task or compliance exercise, but a lived and dialogical process that unites the individual and the institution in an ongoing conversation about purpose. Ikeda's thought thus provides a conceptual bridge between personal philosophical inquiry and collective organisational renewal (Weick, 1995).

One instructive historical case that illuminates the existential implications of mission fidelity comes from Japan itself, particularly from Seinan Gakuin, a

Baptist mission school located in Fukuoka. Founded in the early twentieth century by Southern Baptist missionaries, Seinan Gakuin has long served as a prominent example of a Christian school in a predominantly secular context.

In 1966, on the occasion of the school's fiftieth anniversary, W. M. Garrott, the first president of Seinan Gakuin and principal of Seinan Jo Gakuin (a sister institution) at that time, delivered a commemorative lecture titled "The Eternal Academy". His address, delivered at a time when Japan was widely considered to have completed its postwar reconstruction, offered a striking counter-narrative to institutional pride and expansion. Garrott's message was clear and uncompromising: "Seinan is not eternal" (Garrott, 1966).

This perspective also has implications for contemporary evaluation frameworks. In a system dominated by external metrics and bureaucratic procedures, Garrott's address suggests a radically different question: Are we faithful to the eternal? Assessment, from this view, becomes a form of institutional self-examination in the light of God's calling. Accreditation and quality assurance are not rejected, but subordinated to the deeper task of discerning meaning and mission.

Furthermore, Garrott's address challenges faculty, staff, and students to reimagine their roles. He called upon the Seinan community to "walk together in the path of truth and love"—not in ideological uniformity, but in shared existential orientation. Disagreement and diversity are expected, even welcomed, so long as they remain rooted in a common search for the eternal. The unity of a Christian school, in his words, is not the product of administrative control, but of shared commitment to live before God.

For contemporary Christian schools in Japan, Garrott's words remain deeply relevant. In an era marked by declining birthrates, rising secularism, and increasing pressure to conform to state and market expectations, his address functions as both a warning and a beacon. Schools that lose their existential centre may become successful by external standards but spiritually hollow. By contrast, schools that remain true to their calling—even if small, contested, or misunderstood—may yet become "eternal" in the deepest sense.

Incorporating Garrott's theological-existential lens into institutional practice is no simple task. It requires more than mission statements or commemorative rituals; it demands cultures of discernment, courageous leadership, and communities of mutual accountability. It also requires space for silence, doubt, prayer, and questioning—spaces where the eternal can be encountered anew.

Ultimately, Garrott's address affirms the core premise of this paper: that Christian mission is not a brand to be managed or a legacy to be maintained, but a question to be lived. To ask "Why are we here?" is not a sign of weakness but a mark of fidelity. And to answer, as Garrott did, "We are here to be true to Christ", is not to close inquiry, but to open the door to a lifetime—and an institution—shaped by the eternal.

The present study therefore seeks to accomplish three interrelated objectives. First, it situates Ikeda's existential philosophy within the contemporary discourse on education and mission, highlighting her relevance beyond the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy. Second, it analyses the historical and contemporary challenges of Christian schools in Japan, focusing on the problem of mission drift and the urgent demand for mission reaffirmation in a secularising and pluralising society. Third, it develops a new framework—termed existential mission reaffirmation—that integrates Ikeda's insistence on personal philosophical responsibility with the organisational need for institutional integrity and evaluative accountability. By doing so, the paper contributes both to the philosophy of education and to practical discussions on institutional governance in faith-based contexts, while also suggesting comparative implications for other mission-driven institutions.

Although this study focuses on Christian schools in Japan, similar challenges of secularisation, demographic change, and mission drift can be observed in other contexts such as North America, Korea, and the Philippines. Thus, the Japanese case offers insights that are relevant to Christian education globally.

Methodologically, this paper combines philosophical text analysis with historical and institutional inquiry. By integrating existential philosophy with the study of educational governance, it adopts an interpretive approach rather than an empirical one. Rather than offering empirical generalisations, the study seeks to generate theoretical insights into how existential thought can inform the daily life and evaluative structures of Christian schools.

The argument proceeds as follows. Before turning to Ikeda herself, it is helpful to situate her work within the broader intellectual tradition of existentialism, a movement whose central themes—freedom, mortality, and responsibility—resonate deeply with the theological and educational concerns of Christian schools. The next section introduces Ikeda's philosophy, emphasising her engagement with the questions of death, self, and existential responsibility. Section 3 traces the mission of Christian schools in postwar Japan, identifying key historical shifts and present challenges that motivate

"The unity of a Christian school, in his words, is not the product of administrative control, but of shared commitment to live before God"

the need for reinterpretation. Section 4 connects Ikeda's philosophy with the mission of Christian schools, showing how existential questioning can revitalise organisational identity and communal practices. Section 5 examines the implications for university evaluation and institutional design, reframing assessment as reflective inquiry. Section 6 proposes a new theoretical and practical framework for mission reaffirmation, and Section 7 concludes by summarising contributions and suggesting avenues for future research and comparative study.

By bringing together the existential philosophy of Akiko Ikeda and the institutional challenges of Christian schools, this paper seeks to reclaim mission as a matter of both personal and collective significance. In doing so, it invites educators, administrators, and students alike to recognise that the deepest questions of philosophy and theology are not abstractions, but urgent concerns for the very identity, direction, and future of educational institutions.

2. Existentialism and Akiko Ikeda's Philosophy

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Despite their differences, these thinkers shared a conviction that human beings must be understood not in abstract categories but in relation to their lived experience of freedom, mortality, and responsibility. In educational thought, existentialist perspectives emphasise the cultivation of self-awareness, authenticity, and responsibility rather than the mere transmission of knowledge. For Christian education, these themes resonate deeply with the call to live faithfully before God, to confront finitude, and to embrace freedom as responsibility. Within this broader tradition, Akiko Ikeda (1960–2007) developed a distinctive Japanese engagement with existential questions. Although she never explicitly affirmed the existence of God, her persistent inquiry into death, the self, and truth reveals a philosophical posture that offers valuable resources for rethinking the mission of Christian schools. In this light, Ikeda's writings can be read not in isolation but as a distinct Japanese contribution to existential thought, one that speaks directly to the educational and theological concerns of Christian schools. In this sense, Ikeda can be seen as offering a uniquely Japanese contribution to the existential tradition, one that both resonates with and challenges Christian educational ideals. It is to her life and works that we now turn.

Although she never explicitly affirmed the existence of God, her persistent inquiry into death, the self, and truth reveals a philosophical posture

Akiko Ikeda (1960–2007) graduated from Keio University, Tokyo, majoring in philosophy. After working as an editor and writer, she became independent and published philosophical works for a general readership.

Her thought is characterised by posing fundamental questions through everyday language rather than through technical terms or academic systems. She persistently sought to speak, in concrete and vivid words, about questions concerning the extreme situations of human existence—particularly "death", "the self", and "being". In this respect, she is connected to twentieth-century existentialist philosophy (Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, etc.), yet she may be positioned as a thinker who rearticulated that current in Japanese, in terms closely attuned to contemporary daily experience.

Ikeda's representative work What Is Death? (2009a) succinctly expresses the core of her thought. For her, philosophy was not abstract knowledge but "thinking about death". By facing the inevitability of death head-on, human beings can, for the first time, ask, with genuine seriousness, "What does it mean to live?" Rather than evading death or covering it over with religious consolation or social convention, she argued that it is precisely through death that one becomes conscious of existence; this is the starting point of sustained philosophical reflection.

In What Is the Self? (2009b), she presented human identity not as something reducible to "relational existence" or "social roles", but as an ongoing endeavour to ask, in a radical sense, who the "I" is. This posture not only encourages readers to think for themselves, but it also sends a countercultural message: "Do not settle into given answers".

Ikeda often said that "philosophy is not a scholastic discipline but a technique for living". Her work for young readers, Philosophy for Fourteen-Year-Olds (Ikeda, 2003), is emblematic: it eliminates abstract and difficult vocabulary and reconstructs questions that everyone faces—"Why live?", "What is freedom?", "What is happiness?"—in ordinary language. While this approach was criticised by specialists as "lacking rigour", it conversely became an opportunity to revive philosophy as practical wisdom for life, accessible and dialogical.

What is important here is that Ikeda's philosophy was not something that "provides answers", but something that "provides questions". For her, philosophy was not the learning of authoritative systems but the very act of continuing to think with one's own head, in season and out of season.

At the same time, these criticisms may also reflect a constricted understanding of the reach of her philosophy. One could say that she sought a "philosophy of living" that goes beyond "philosophy as an academic discipline". In this sense, Ikeda's thought offers an occasion to retrieve an institution's

mission and ideals—prone to becoming mere slogans or being institutionalised—once again as fundamental questions that must be faced.

Ikeda's arguments offer significant suggestions in educational contexts, especially when set alongside the mission of Christian schools. "Facing death" resonates with the founding spirit's emphasis on "eternal life" and on the "human being standing before God". The attitude of "thinking with one's own head" corresponds to the process by which students actively rethink and make their own the founding spirit, moving from external assent to internal appropriation. A philosophy that "does not rely on authority" connects with the posture by which educational organisations reaffirm their mission autonomously rather than being swept along by external evaluations or social pressures. In this way, Akiko Ikeda's thought is not merely a collection of philosophical essays; it can serve as a theoretical foundation for mission reaffirmation in educational organisations.

Ikeda did not explicitly affirm the existence of God, yet this very absence makes her thought a valuable resource for Christian schools. By asking fundamental questions without theological presuppositions, her philosophy opens a space where students and educators can reappropriate the founding spirit in their own terms.

3. The Mission of Christian Schools in Postwar Japan

After the Second World War, Japan's educational system was extensively reorganised under the occupation policy of the General Headquarters (GHQ). In that process, freedom of religion was explicitly stipulated in the Constitution, and Christian schools—which had been constrained before and during the war—recovered a certain degree of freedom in educational activities. In the immediate postwar period, Christian education was positively evaluated in connection with democratic education; Christian schools took on a new role (Astley & Francis, 1996) while inheriting prewar traditions and cultivating new curricula aligned with peace and human rights.

During this period, many Christian schools placed at the core of education such ideals as "character formation", "love of neighbour", and "freedom and responsibility". The founding of International Christian University (ICU), for example, was an attempt to embody in institutional form the ideals of peace, reconciliation, and international cooperation in postwar Japan. Such developments provided Christian schools with an opportunity to gain a measure of social trust during the reconstruction era and to articulate a distinctive educational identity.

From the period of high economic growth onward, religious consciousness in Japanese society gradually attenuated, and Christian schools were drawn into the broad wave of secularisation. In many school corporations, the proportion of Christian faculty and board members declined; while the founding spirit remained as a formal slogan, it receded from practical arenas of education and management and, in some cases, became largely ceremonial.

Such a process may be understood as "mission drift": the educational ideals proclaimed at founding, under the influence of changes in the external environment (securing applicants, emphasising employment outcomes, stabilising financial bases, and responding to policy incentives), gradually become blurred and are replaced by managerial rationality and social demands. As a result, many observers contend that Christian schools are on the verge of losing their distinctiveness from "ordinary private schools".

In the twenty-first century, Japanese society faces major structural challenges posed by a declining birthrate and population decrease. The difficulty of securing incoming students implies a concrete crisis of survival for Christian schools. At the same time, under globalisation and religious pluralisation, it has become difficult in the educational setting to present Christianity as the sole norm; tensions arise between "religious neutrality" and the "founding spirit".

While such a situation accelerates the hollowing out of ideals, it can also become an occasion to rethink "what the original mission is". In other words, the more the external environment grows severe, the more Christian schools are pressed to reaffirm their reason for existence and to articulate their distinct contribution to the common good.

In recent years, multiple Christian school corporations have observed efforts by boards and faculty to reinterpret the founding spirit and rearticulate it as a mission suited to contemporary contexts. For example, the ideal of "forming free persons who stand before God" has been connected with education that respects diversity, and "love of neighbour" has been correlated with global citizenship and intercultural competence.

What is crucial in this process is a perspective that understands the founding spirit not as a mere historical legacy but as an existential task that must be re-examined here and now. That is, facing questions such as "Why do we learn and teach at this school?" and "What is the ultimate purpose of our education?" is key to making ideals living realities in the present.

As institutional frameworks such as university accreditation and self-study have been put in place, Christian schools are required to respond to external criteria and to explain themselves in standardised

> *"After the Second World War, Japan's educational system was extensively re-organised... In that process, freedom of religion was explicitly stipulated in the Constitution"*

formats. While these systems contribute to quality assurance in education, they also carry the risk of ending in formal reporting, thereby missing the occasion to approach the organisation's essential mission.

If we take Ikeda's thought as a clue, however, evaluation can be reconceived not as "accountability to the outside" but as a responsibility to respond to one's own reason for being. In other words, by making the site of evaluation an occasion to reexamine the founding spirit existentially, Christian schools can utilise evaluation not as a process in which they are buffeted by external pressures, but as an occasion to deepen their mission and renew institutional purpose.

As seen above, Christian schools in postwar Japan have passed through multiple stages: (1) a restart through connection with postwar democracy, (2) secularisation and mission drift from the period of high economic growth onward, (3) contemporary challenges of declining birthrate and pluralisation, and (4) the complex relationship with evaluation systems.

> *... If one merely conforms to external evaluation, organisational identity is easily lost.*

Common to this process is a constant tension between "the hollowing out of ideals" and "the reinterpretation of ideals". To overcome this tension, it is indispensable to reframe ideals not as "institutional requirements" but as "fundamental questions".

For example, institutions such as Seinan Gakuin and ICU illustrate how mission questions emerge in concrete educational practices. These cases show that mission reaffirmation is not only a theoretical concern but also a practical task within governance and daily school life.

The existential philosophy of Akiko Ikeda, discussed in the previous section, can provide such a perspective. The next section directly connects Ikeda's arguments with the mission of Christian schools and proposes a new theoretical framework of "existential mission reaffirmation".

4. Connecting Ikeda's Thought with the Mission of Christian Schools

Ikeda's thought begins with fundamental questions such as "What is death?" and "What is the self?" The founding spirit of Christian schools likewise centres on questions of death and life—"eternal life" and the "person who stands before God" (Astley & Francis, 1996). Although the expressions differ, what both share is the existential task of "how to inquire into the meaning of human existence" (Agamben, 2005).

While Ikeda never explicitly affirmed the existence of God in her writings, and consistently refrained from adopting any theological or confessional stance, her existential questioning—particularly around death, the self, and meaning—opens a space of resonance with theological concerns. Her work is strictly philosophical rather than doctrinal or theistic, yet it probes the same dimensions of human existence—mortality, responsibility, and meaning—that Christian theology also seeks to illuminate. In this sense, Ikeda provides a philosophical resource for faith-based education without requiring theological presuppositions.

For Ikeda, "thinking about death" was a catalyst for grasping the meaning of life. In Christianity, "death and resurrection" serve as the ground of character formation and hope in education. Through this overlap, Ikeda's philosophy can prevent the hollowing out of ideals in Christian schools and serve as a mediation that connects theological expressions to contemporary human questions and experiences.

"Thinking with One's Own Head" and the "Internalisation of the Founding Spirit".

Ikeda insisted that one must not entrust one's thinking to others or to authority. This suggests the importance, within Christian schools, of students and faculty reexamining the founding spirit for themselves and internalising it as their own, rather than receiving it as a slogan imposed from the outside.

For example, when students consider "What is love of neighbour?" and "What does it mean to stand before God?" not as mere ideals but as their own tasks, the founding spirit for the first time functions as a "living ideal". Ikeda's thought becomes a philosophical tool that prompts this inner work and facilitates ownership.

Ikeda pursued a philosophy of thinking for oneself without relying on academic authority. This stance is suggestive for Christian schools facing external evaluation systems and social expectations. If one merely conforms to external evaluation, organisational identity is easily lost. Yet by introducing an Ikeda-like perspective, responding to external pressure can become an occasion to reexamine one's mission and to articulate reasons underlying institutional practices. In short, in order to maintain organisational autonomy, what is needed is not blind obedience to external demands but a posture of reconstructing one's ideals with one's own head—that is, reflective agency at the institutional level.

What I wish to propose here is a perspective of existential mission reaffirmation. Mediated by Ikeda's philosophy, this denotes an undertaking in which individuals and organisations together reexamine the founding spirit.

Individual level

Students and faculty take upon themselves fundamental questions such as "death", "life", and "meaning".

Organisational level
School corporations and faculties reaffirm ideals not as mere forms but as declarations of reason for existence.

Systemic level
University evaluation and accreditation are reconstructed as occasions for ideational self-reflection and value clarification.

Through the connection of these three strata, the mission of Christian schools is liberated from slogan-like fixation and acquires contemporary significance as an ideal that is continually questioned and faithfully interpreted.

The framework of existential mission reaffirmation is applicable to concrete educational practice as well.

Courses
By treating Ikeda's works as instructional materials and having students think about themes such as "death", "the self", and "freedom", one fosters understanding and ownership of the founding spirit.

Cocurricular activities
Religious events and service activities are positioned as venues for mission reaffirmation, incorporating processes by which students "question meaning with their own heads".

Evaluation systems
Student surveys and self-study processes are utilised as occasions to reinterpret ideals internally, thereby aligning assessment with formation.

Thus, Ikeda's thought is not merely a theoretical resource; it can concretely contribute to the operation of educational organisations and to daily educational practice. Akiko Ikeda's philosophy provides a perspective for reaffirming the mission of Christian schools as an existential question, rather than leaving it as a "rephrasing of ideals" or a "mere institutional explanation". Her emphases on "death", "the self", and "thinking with one's own head", when connected to the process by which students and faculty actively reexamine the founding spirit, open a new framework for mission reaffirmation.

Importantly, mission reaffirmation should not be limited to administrators and faculty. Students themselves must take ownership by reinterpreting the founding spirit as their own existential question. In this sense, Ikeda's call to "think with one's own head" resonates directly with student participation in Christian education.

The next section applies this perspective of existential mission reaffirmation to higher education evaluation and institutional design, and discusses theoretical and practical prospects for how Christian schools can maintain their reason for existence without being carried along by external standards.

5. Implications for University Evaluation and Institutional Design
Since the 2000s, evaluation systems in Japanese higher education have been institutionalised with self-study and accreditation as their pillars.

In Japan, accreditation frameworks led by the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA) require institutions to produce detailed self-study reports, a process similar to accreditation systems in the United States. While these mechanisms promote accountability and transparency, they also risk reducing mission to a formal requirement unless they are reframed as opportunities for existential reflection and reaffirmation.

These frameworks are important mechanisms that contribute to quality assurance in education and promote accountability for universities and school corporations. At the same time, however, current systems tend to prioritise "conformity to external standards", making it difficult to sufficiently reflect the distinctive mission and ideals of each educational organisation. For Christian schools in particular, there is a heightened risk that the expression of their mission will be reduced to a "formal requirement" for external consistency, with little interpretive depth.

> *… there is a heightened risk that the expression of their mission will be reduced to a "formal requirement" for external consistency, with little interpretive depth.*

If we take Akiko Ikeda's existential philosophy as a guide, evaluation can be redefined not as mere "explanation to the outside" but as a response to one's reason for existence (Weick, 1995). External standards are necessary, but rather than blindly conforming to them, institutions should take them as an opportunity to reexamine their own mission at a fundamental level. Just as individuals take upon themselves questions of "death" and "the self", organisations likewise must reaffirm their "founding spirit" as their existential foundation. In this sense, evaluation is not primarily compliance but reflection, and it belongs to the institution's formative practice.

Ikeda's emphasis on the attitude of "thinking with one's own head" undergirds the legitimacy of student participation in evaluation systems. Student involvement in evaluation is not merely a matter of reflecting the "voice of the users". Rather, it is an educational process in which students take up the mission as their own question and jointly reaffirm the organisation's identity. Accordingly, student participation contributes not only to the democratisation of evaluation but also constitutes educational practice of ideals in itself.

In light of the above, institutional design in Christian schools should incorporate the following orientations: dual evaluation framework: integrate evaluation that confirms conformity to external

standards with reflective evaluation that existentially reexamines the mission. Mission-centred indicators: measure and interpret educational goals and learning outcomes explicitly in relation to the founding spirit. Shared participation of students and faculty: make evaluation a process in which the entire institution reconsiders its ideals, rather than delegating it solely to experts or administrative offices. In this way, evaluation is transformed from an "external obligation" into an "opportunity for mission reaffirmation".

The perspective of "existential mission reaffirmation", mediated by Akiko Ikeda's thought, opens the possibility of redesigning university evaluation systems as occasions for ideational self-reflection. For Christian schools in particular, evaluation does not end in responding to external demands but becomes an educational opportunity to deepen their ideals. This is not simply a matter of governance reform but a practical framework for ensuring that educational organisations maintain their reason for existence in a vital, enduring way.

> *... the mission of Christian schools is not confined to past legacies or external demands*

6. Toward a New Framework of Mission Reaffirmation

Bringing together the preceding discussion, Akiko Ikeda's existential philosophy offers a new perspective for mission reaffirmation in Christian schools. It mediates between philosophical questions (death, the self, meaning) and theological questions (eternity, personhood, love of neighbour), functioning as a theoretical foundation that connects individual reflection with organisational mission. Beyond the conventional approaches of "inheriting ideals" or "conforming to institutional requirements", this perspective presents mission reaffirmation as an ongoing endeavour of questioning that is both faithful and innovative (Astley & Francis, 1996).

To concretise this theory, I propose a framework called Existential Mission Reaffirmation, which consists of the following three-tiered structure: Individual level: Students and faculty, engaging with Ikeda's arguments, consider "death", "the self", and "meaning" as their own tasks. Through this process, the founding spirit is internalised in a subjective and active way. Organisational level: School corporations and faculties reaffirm the founding spirit not as a mere historical slogan but as their reason for existence. Mechanisms for periodically "re-questioning" ideals are institutionalised. Systemic level: University evaluation and accreditation are redesigned not merely as frameworks of compliance but as venues for ideational self-reflection and mutual learning.

When this model is reflected in institutional design, the following principles emerge: Mission as the Reflective Core: Evaluation and curriculum development are premised upon the act of reflecting on ideals and making them explicit in practice. Shared subjectivity: Students, faculty, and boards of trustees together secure venues for questioning ideals, fostering ownership and dialogue. Open-ended Faithfulness: The founding spirit is not fixed but is continually open to new interpretations and practices responsive to context.

This framework is applicable not only to Christian schools but also to other educational organisations seeking to clarify their identity. In practical terms, Ikeda's works can be introduced in undergraduate general education or first-year seminar courses, where students engage directly with existential questions in connection to their school's mission. Through such initiatives, the abstract idea of mission becomes a lived pedagogical practice. In a society where secularisation advances, maintaining ideals as an "endeavour of questioning" is a universal educational task. In international comparative research as well, attempts to integrate existential philosophy with religious educational ideals may contribute to both the philosophy of education and higher education governance (Agamben, 2005), enriching cross-cultural dialogue.

Although this framework has been articulated in the Japanese context, similar pressures of secularisation, demographic decline, and mission drift are evident in Christian schools worldwide, from North America to Asia. Thus, the Japanese case can contribute comparative insights for Christian education on a global scale.

Furthermore, the proposed framework is not based on empirical data alone but on a methodological integration of philosophical text analysis, historical case study, and institutional critique. This interpretive approach underscores that mission reaffirmation must be examined not only as policy or management but as an existential and theological question.

"Existential Mission Reaffirmation" is a three-layered model of reinterpretation mediated by Ikeda's philosophy at the individual, organisational, and systemic levels. Through this framework, the mission of Christian schools is not confined to past legacies or external demands but is regenerated as a living ideal that continually questions us in the present and orients future practice.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined the reaffirmation of mission in postwar Japanese Christian schools on the theoretical foundation of Akiko Ikeda's existential philosophy. The introduction highlighted the contemporary challenges of declining birth

rates, secularisation, and religious pluralism, in which founding spirits are prone to hollowing out. Ikeda's thought was then organised as an existential philosophy grounded in fundamental questions of "death", "the self", and "meaning", and both its significance and criticisms were reviewed. Subsequently, the historical trajectory of Christian schools and the problem of mission drift were surveyed, leading to the articulation of a framework of existential mission reaffirmation by connecting Ikeda's philosophy with the founding spirit. Finally, implications for university evaluation and institutional design were discussed, and the concretisation of a new model was proposed. The study also aims to contribute to an interdisciplinary conversation at the intersection of existential philosophy, educational theory, and organisational studies. By weaving together personal reflection, institutional identity, and systemic evaluation, it provides a framework that can inform both the philosophical foundations and practical structures of mission-driven education.

The theoretical contributions of this study can be summarised in three points: Bridging existential philosophy and organisational studies in education: By mediating through Ikeda's thought, the paper presented a perspective that connects individual reflection with organisational mission (Weick, 1995). Reinterpreting the founding spirit: Ideals were redefined not as historical legacies or institutional requirements but as existential tasks that are continually questioned and re-owned. Redefining university evaluation: The study provided a theoretical basis for transforming evaluation from compliance to reflection, aligning assessment with formation and purpose.

Practically, the framework of "existential mission reaffirmation" can be applied to courses, cocurricular activities, and institutional design in Christian schools. Moreover, this framework is not limited to Christian schools; it is effective for other educational institutions seeking to clarify their ideological identity. Particularly, incorporating student participation into evaluation processes as an educational occasion is essential for making ideals living realities rather than mere statements.

This paper primarily aimed to construct a theoretical framework. Future work should verify the validity of the "existential mission reaffirmation" model through concrete case studies and comparative research. Beyond Christian schools in Japan, comparative analysis with faith-based institutions overseas will clarify its international applicability. Furthermore, deeper dialogue between Ikeda's philosophy and theological traditions will contribute to the advancement of research on educational ideals and institutional identity.

In conclusion, Akiko Ikeda's thought can serve as both a theoretical and practical resource for Christian schools in postwar Japan to overcome crises. The reaffirmation of the founding spirit as a "response to reason for existence" is indispensable for keeping ideals alive within educational organisations. Christian schools should remain institutions that, beyond conformity to external standards, continually respond to the question, "Why are we here?". At the same time, mission reaffirmation must not be confined to administrators and faculty. Students themselves must take ownership of the founding spirit by reinterpreting it as their own existential question. In this sense, Ikeda's call to "think with one's own head" resonates directly with student participation, making student engagement a central practice rather than a peripheral one in Christian education. This study has proposed a new framework for sustaining such a stance and for cultivating communities of reflective practice. TEACH

… incorporating student participation into evaluation processes as an educational occasion is essential for making ideals living realities rather than mere statements.

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TEACH[R]

Christian pedagogical praxis: from head to heart to hand: Hearing afresh what the Biblical Scriptures require in a contemporary application of instructional principles

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Abstract

Assessing the efficacy of instruction relies on our ability to measure performance. Nowhere is this more evident than in a demonstration of competence, an opportunity to determine whether the newly acquired knowledge can drive the learner towards an observable product. This speaks to the integrity of our instruction, that there must be congruence between belief and behaviour and a fundamental shift from the Head (what we know) to the Heart (what we believe) to the Hand (what we choose to do). After establishing a link between instruction and demonstration, a case for teacher-centred instruction will be made before discussing the importance of intentionality in pedagogical praxis. The intended audience for this thesis is Christian educators at secondary and tertiary institutions.

> *It would seem that each generation needs to renegotiate the terms of the temporal treaty between 'then' and 'now'*

Introduction

An exegetical conversation between the contemporary Christian community (church, school or higher education) and the historical scriptures of the Bible informs the space within which the contours of the solution to a particular need within that community will take shape. The contemporary reader's interpretation of the scriptures will be a unique conversation within their community's context and time (and perhaps even more removed from the historical writer's intention). One strength of this dialogic process is that it is a conversation that has been taking place since the 1st-century church community. It would seem that each generation needs to renegotiate the terms of the temporal treaty between 'then' and 'now' to hear afresh what the scriptures have to speak into their particular situation and social framework (Boff, 1987, p. 148).

This 'looking afresh' to the current 'now' has the effect not only of working towards a contemporary application of scripture but also holds the potential of a shedding (or correction) of any misinterpretation (or misuse of interpretation) that might have taken place within the historical interim. A natural corollary would be that the rendering of the said 'temporal agreement' should include the outworking of the newly gained theology, through the praxis lens of the 'community of inquiry' concerned.

> The "political theologian" should be more alert to what is occurring in the community and in society in general than to the past meaning of the pages of scripture. For this theologian, it is more important to theorize "what the Spirit says in the churches" than to apprehend what the Spirit said "once upon a time."… As a consequence, the theoretical solution sought by the "political theologian" for a determinate situation is in some sort already given in the actual practice of Christians, who, like other human beings, endeavour to bring an adequate solution to the problems with which they find themselves confronted
>
> (Boff, 1987, p.151).

Boff now posits that not only must the historical scriptures find their practical outworking nuanced within a contemporary Christian community, but that such a solution may already be embedded

and taking place within that community. Such a view aligns closely with Groome's emphasis on the inseparable relationship between belief and behaviour, "Christian faith is not merely to be understood but lived" (1980, p.184). To some extent, then, the theologian need only examine what the community already does to determine what practical direction it should be initiating in response to scriptural interpretation. It is both enlightening and refreshing that the elusive key to unlocking a particular interpretive conundrum might reside 'within' rather than 'without' a living community. Gadamer also concedes that textual application not only holds utility for the community but is a fundamental part of the interpretive process (in a Gadamerian sense, between the community and its text or tradition):

> In the course of our reflections we have come to see that understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation. ThusThus, we are forced to go one step beyond romantic hermeneutics, as it were, by regarding not only understanding and interpretation, but also application as comprising one unified process (1989, p.305).

However, there remains a crucial caveat before we can proceed. Snodgrass reminds us of the simplistic truth that in interpreting ancient texts (finding contemporary meaning or significance), it is important to know exactly when to stop interpreting. Having established a link between the source domain (text) and the target domain (present-day application), we should not then assume that all aspects of the two correlate perfectly and simply initiate a comprehensive transfer of every morsel of 'meaning' from the historical past indiscriminately to the now. The 'ancient text' is a historical document whose author is no longer available to defend its purpose, identify its audience or clarify its interpretation.

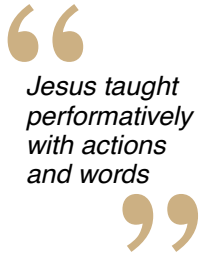
> The (biblical) text is not to us, even throughthough it is for us. The first step in interpreting the text is allowing it to be what it is -an ancient text. Only when the text is allowed to be what it is can it confront us in legitimate ways and have a chance of transforming us. Ancient texts should not be asked to deal with all our issues. Problems such as the abuse of women are horrendous, and churches must address this, but the biblical text must be allowed to do its task, not forced to do ours or to treat every subject we know (Snodgrass, 2008, p.115).

Instruction and demonstration

A careful rendering of the Gospels shows a clear continuity between instruction and demonstration (i.e. Jesus teaches a principle, then demonstrates that principle in a practical application, e.g. Luke 10:27 "Love your neighbour as yourself" followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). Superficially, praxis yields a clear opportunity to determine whether learning has taken place, in that the intellectual knowledge obtained must now be driven through a procedural recount of the academic learning, towards an observable product. Of greater interest is that between the theory and the practical exercise lies a newly transformed intentionality that drives the process in the mind and hopefully the heart of the learner – a permanent change in behaviour.

It would be difficult to conceive of Jesus ever receiving an 'approval to teach'. Although arguably an aficionado of engagement, confrontation and transformation, the elucidation of content through formalised objectives (serving as evidential markers) was never His concern. Rather, Jesus taught performatively with actions and words that were never intended to be limited to the transmission of facts.

> They (parables) anticipate responsive activity; they anticipate that his hearers and readers will do something in light of the teaching. How does Jesus teach faith? By falling asleep on a sinking boat. That curricular effort does something. It not only informs; it instigates (Blount, 2016, p.184).



Extrapolating this parabolic principle to the Christian school setting, Hanscamp et al. (2019a) can posit, not just a practical approach, but a formation suggestive of Greek *paideia* – 'good citizenry'. The purpose of Christian education is to seek a particular type of student formation. Through *paideic* curriculum-based instruction, students are invited to be people who not only understand the world God has made through the lens of His big story, but are inspired to be engaged in His world as they live out what it is to be truly human as an image-bearer of the creator (Hanscamp et al., 2019a, p. 23). The formational learning posited (holistic paideic instruction designed to promote 'good citizenry') suggests a movement from 'head' to 'heart' to 'hand' – a transition from what is known (head) to what is believed (heart) and finally what is done (hand). The burden on the teacher then becomes one of embedding responsive opportunities within the teaching program for the student to not just demonstrate what they have learnt, but to experience their learning through authentic assessment that embodies real-world tasks that mimic the complex challenges of professional and social life. As Palmer argues, "We must make sure that we measure things worth measuring in the context of authentic education" (1998, p. 93). For example, if practising biologists

spend half their time in the laboratory performing experiments, then so should Biology students. If graduates of Ancient History are required to be adept with hieroglyphics and archaeological excavation skills, then so should our Ancient History students. If mathematicians secure their formulae in software algorithms, then how relevant is it to require school students to memorise dozens of formulae to demonstrate their ability to manipulate mathematical problems? To do less is to assume that education has become isolated from vocation.

> Formational learning equips a student's hands and captures the idea of a positive and embodied response. We know that the formation of head and heart, when allowed the freedom to respond, cannot help but be demonstrated in a response and in actions of the hands. Formation generates responsiveness because deep knowing is always embedded in actions and engagement (Hanscamp et al., 2019b, p. 7).

> *... there must be a fundamental shift from telling students about this ethereal utopia, to finding a way to model it within our classroom communities*

On the online site 'Catholic Identity', Pope Francis also makes a clear connection between the 'head, heart and hands' approach with holistic 'formational learning'. According to Pope Francis, knowledge (the Head) must include an experiential dimension (the Heart) but also an application of knowledge, skills and practice (the 'Hands') for the individual to make a difference in the world. For Pope Francis, the 'formational' aspect is achieved through this experiential dimension of the 'heart' that allows for "deep and reflective learning" (2020).

Every lesson requires a decision leading to a transformative element that might be described as a cognitive, geographical dislocation – a provocative push from where the student is now, to where they ought to be. Hence, a pedagogical shift from "being told something to being told to do something… . A forward movement beyond knowing something new into doing something new" (Blount, 2016, p. 185). Perhaps then teaching might be described more accurately as an intellectual force pushing students from where they are to where the instruction should find its natural destination, more so than a mere 'filling the head'. Perhaps each new lesson should have the destructive potential to unsettle the foundation of all learning that has gone before it and to dislocate the comfortable paradigms we hold dear. Ellis (1902) develops this further to suggest, "Education is only good when what is taught grows into an auto-suggestion; i.e., when in particular cases the well-taught person must consciously do the right he has been shown" (p. 453).

Teacher-centred instruction

Teachers play an important role in the movement of Head, Heart and Hand. The parabolic instruction from Jesus' teachings and the subtle nuances of deep learning, in the sense that instruction moves from the intellect to the heart and then the hand in a practical sense, is drawn out by Blount. Clearly, Jesus moves beyond the simplistic apprenticeship model of practical demonstration (e.g., 'hold the hammer like this'), to a much more complex and deeply richer learning experience that 'points' rather than 'shows'. In the Markan Gospel, Jesus instructs by demonstrating a practical *imitatio Dei* for his disciples, showing God's love not as an abstract theoretical construct, but by touching lepers (1:40-45), treating women as equals (7:24-30), and by associating with the outcasts of his society (2:13-17) (Blount, 2016, p. 185). Undoubtedly, such a practical curriculum would serve to unsettle the paradigmatic social foundations of first-century Israel.

Blount now moves the focus from the student to the teacher and, in so doing, begins to unpack the mystery, role and educational utility contained within the parables. As the parables point to Jesus, so too must our instruction locate the teacher as the focal point of our instructional practices. The teacher's role is to incarnate Jesus in the classroom, to be God 'with skin on' to their students.

> But the answer to the mystery of the parables … is not found in words, …, but in comprehending and emulating the way this teacher lives his life. The parables elucidate that teaching; they are not the teaching itself… . The parables are pointers. They do not point to Jesus as much as they point from Jesus … . One should not as much study the parables as follow from Jesus and how he lives his life to the parables and how they elucidate that living (2016, p.185).

If we are to assume that the role of education is *paideic* – to create healthy, complete citizens for tomorrow – then there must be a fundamental shift from telling students about this ethereal utopia, to finding a way to model it within our classroom communities. Is it possible that the syllabus is not outcomes or content or assessment to be uploaded, learned and outworked, but a person – the personhood of the teacher?

Motivation and intentionality

Between instruction ('head knowledge') and practical exercise ('hand' application) lies another component that speaks to a more holistic interpretation of whether teaching has taken place. If learning is indeed a 'permanent change in behaviour' (Pressbooks, n.d., para. 2), then an understanding of the drivers of that change cannot remain in a 'black box' where input is instruction, output is observable evidence, but the motivational (i.e. 'Heart' component of 'Head to Heart to Hand') processes remain obscured. In its simplest form, an understanding of this process will speak to the

integrity of the transformation within the learner – the congruence between how their newfound behaviour lines up with what they believe, and more fundamentally, the value we place on truth. Motivation itself is arguably instructional, given the disparity between one who chooses not to steal because she believes it is fundamentally wrong and another who chooses similarly on the basis that they wish to avoid jail time. We must understand the underlying driving motivation behind such transformational activity. Chaput (1975) offers:

> Appearance is deceiving and hypocritical unless the intention is mutual to the action. Jesus' concern is for attitude, motivation, thought, understanding. It is wrong not only to kill a person, but to get angry enough to consider such an act. It is wrong not only to commit adultery, but to lust after a woman, who may never know of such intentions on the part of another. The entire or "whole man" is at task here. … That which is within man must become exterior to himself in order that another might know what "goes on" within that man. But what of the continuity between man's thoughts and intentions, and his actions? (p.116).

Drawing this notion of intentionality back to the above discussion of the practical sequence of head–heart–hand, in his blog, Mason (2017, as cited in Hanscamp, 2019b) pulls these two ideas together in advocating that the 'hands' (the 'good' I now know), not only reveal what is in the 'heart' (intentionality - the 'good' I now choose), but that the cycle can also begin with the hands giving unction to passion and a cognitive response through a desire to understand the situation that has been presented. 'Hand' have potential as both the input and output of the 'heart' and the 'head'.

> The hands give practical expression to what we think and feel. Our hands thus reflect what is going on in our hearts and heads, an output of faith. On the other hand, our actions can be an input to faith as well. Children mostly begin with action, and as problems arisearise, they need to think and problem solve, which in turn involves the heart, feelings and emotions. Therefore, actions can be precursor and catalyst to understanding and feeling, as well as a response to it (para.8).

This concept of intentionality is taken a step further by Pope Francis, who suggests that "the head, the heart and hands are needed in order to be coherent so that one thinks what one feels and does, feels what one thinks and does, and does what one feels and thinks" (Gomes, 2021).

The previous section established that practical exercises were more than just a tokenistic addendum to teaching, but an opportunity for an authentic assessment that drives the knowledge deep. Further, practical assessment provides evidence of learning via an observable product and proof of competence on the part of the learner, satisfying a desire to test-drive the abstracted concepts. I then reduced this process to a movement from 'the head to the heart to the hand'. Involving the students in the practical selection process will ensure they will both value the process and provide them with 'ownership' of their practical experience and any subsequent learning that may arise directly or indirectly from their experience – the 'buy-in'.

To ensure the practical exercise holds meaningful educational utility, I suggest the following questions might be used as a guide for the Christian educator, aiming for a cluster of at least three will ensure the exercise will hold educational traction for the students. The questions were motivated by a combination of personal experience and literature review and may be used in curriculum development.

Does the practical exercise…

- Provide a clear continuity between instruction and demonstration (in a similar way to the Gospels)? i.e., does the latter develop the former?
- Provide a clear opportunity to determine whether learning has taken place? i.e., is there a clear link between the instruction and an observable product?
- Anticipate/encourage responsive activity? i.e., that the student will do something in light of the teaching?
- Provide evidence of any congruence between beliefs and action within the learner? i.e., could both attitude and motivation in the learner be discerned?
- Model a way to be emulated? e.g., Jesus touching lepers (Blount, p. 185).
- Constitute a movement from Head to Heart to Hand? i.e., from Head knowledge to Heart attitude to Hand application?
- What is the likelihood of a permanent change in behaviour? i.e., could the learner extrapolate the teaching to other contexts and situations?

> *… practical exercises were more than just a tokenistic addendum to teaching*

Conclusion

Complemented by the literature available, practical evaluation has long been recognised as an 'authentic assessment' that provides a rich source of learning and an observable, evaluative product for the teacher. What arose indirectly from the literature, was a deep desire in the learner to outwork their newly formed knowledge as a 'proof of competence', a need to 'test-drive' the newly

> *I was moved to formulate the pedagogical movement – 'from head to heart to hand'*

abstracted concepts, both for their teacher and also for their own satisfaction. From this desire, I was moved to formulate the pedagogical movement – 'from head to heart to hand' to better conceptualise the pedagogical transition from head (what I know) to heart (what I believe) to hand (what I will now do considering the newly formed knowledge). More research would be needed to confirm this connection. A longitudinal study into the efficacy of a practical outworking/demonstration on student retention of outcomes would be an invaluable and welcome addition to the literature. TEACH

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