

# TEACH JOURNAL

OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

## ENGAGING INDIGENOUS CURRICULUM

Students, families and communities

## RESEARCH FROM THE INSIDE

One teacher's journey

## A RECONCILIATION AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Cover: A First Nations student leader of Suncoast Christian College tying fabric onto the Reconciliation Rope at the school 2020 Reconciliation Assembly. Photography: Joshua Brown

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CONTENTS

3 Editorial

TEACHING & PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

4 Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities Francis Bobongie-Harris

8 Research from the inside: One teacher's research journey within a school setting Vladka Henley

14 Growing wellbeing Peter Beamish

EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

16 A journey of cultural change Garth Reid, Haley Whitfield and Greg Mattiske

25 Where to go for a Christian research degree [Part 1] Maria Northcote, Peter Kilgour and Carolyn Rickett

35 The attrition from Christian faith of our graduates while at university: Why does it happen, and what can be done about it? John Collier

RESEARCH & SCHOLARSHIP

42 An evaluation of teacher stressors in an era of COVID-19: An initial analysis Peter Kilgour, Maria Northcote, Jason Morton and Kirsty Pearce

49 Epistemological implications of a 'convergent parallel mixed methods' research design Malcolm S. Buchanan and Robert M. Herschell

56 Evaluating evidence for the historical resurrection: A content-centered approach to the resurrection John Grant, Jeffrey M. Byford and Satomi Izumi-Taylor

REFLECTIONS, IMPRESSIONS & EXPERIENCES

63 Book reviews:

Burnout: A guide to identifying recovery Glenys Perry

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Suncoast Christian College staff in the Reconciliation Space point out the symbolic cross inspiration for a Christian Education Ministry.

# Ministry Of Teaching

## EDITORIAL

Graeme Perry

**“You sit in the window seat.” Responding to the strong intonation I struggled across two seats from the aisle and dumped down. “You like to look out the window.” Other essential conversation with my wife had exhausted while on the flight from Sydney, then transiting through Melbourne airport. This next leg would overfly home to gain a direct uninterrupted trip to Townsville, to witness my granddaughter’s graduation from Medicine. I had mused on how her optimised Christian education had buoyed her in the ‘struggles’ to this culmination.**

Soon my relaxed gaze soaked in the western side landscape, enjoying the transitions from urban to rural, plains to hills and mountains, mid-afternoon light colour transitions, feelings of escape from tasks, freedom and then unexpectedly, patriotism. The Australian flag, proudly displayed on my desk when working internationally, flapped momentarily in my mind. But, it was replaced by a ‘borrowed’ thought. What would I hear if the “stones were to cry out” (Luke 19:40).

An emerging fragmented mental narrative skipped over the complexities of original land formation and subsequent geomorphism creating awesome lookouts and outlooks. It lingered on the indigenous ‘Dreaming’ messaging of a beginning and this land’s first culture, rock imaged to include hand stencilled ochre motifs, and ‘stick figures’, animal profiles—turtle, kangaroo, and serpent, and even a sailing ship. What storying of Country would these rock pictures prompt in the minds of elders who might then ‘speak out’ this record?

As the sun’s rays crossed into the cabin I felt comfortably warmed, but clearly it was too hot for others, the beams too bright for screens, so earlier blinds had cut off the unwanted vision and exposing light. Most of the passengers were intentionally unaware of our transition over Country. It was so like the prevailing disinterest in First People’s history—an ancient culture connecting food, law, land management and spirituality.

The recent death of David Gulpilil (29th of November 2021) came to my musing. How readily our culture embraced his creativity in dance, music, art, and words within film (*Walkabout*, *Storm Boy*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*), TV and other artistic events. White culture ‘gifted’ him alcoholism, resultant clashes with the law and lung cancer which terminated his life.

Looking out the window, the lowered sun now

cast long shadows so that little of the landscape was visible. A hazy misting seemed to obscure any ‘rock messaging’, a grey veil over a colourless surface. The country lacked definition and ‘seeing’ it became interpretatively difficult. In my mind I was muddling over the untaught massacre of first inhabitants, the purpose of ‘native’ missions, associated claimed misery and misfortune, stolen generations, involvement of my family members and further how our nation has accepted and oriented to success so many immigrants and refugees, yet disproportionately incarcerated its indigenous population. The confusing complexity of concepts like structural discrimination, critical race theory, identity fraud (Grieve-Williams, 2021, p. 16, Ingram, 2021, p. 16) and an increasing vehemence in racial politicking enraged my mind prejudicing ‘reconciliation’. Can schools help here? Ultimately will we ‘land’ safely?

This journal issue provides two articles which can helpfully clarify confused thinking on the national curriculum requirements for Indigenous Studies in schools. Bobongie-Harris (p. 4) offers guidelines for the implementation of curriculum and Reid et al. (p. 16) share collaborative autoethnographic reflections on a decade of inclusive cultural change in their school. Both exemplify insider research including issues discussed by Henley (p. 8) to aid researchers.

As educators, let’s seize the opportunity to engage with expansive views, listen if ‘rocks cry out’, and feel the warmth of the Son. Avoid drawing down the blinds to focus only on the comfortable dimness of personal interests and limited awareness. Value vision.

Always choose the window seat. **TEACH**

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“*The confusing complexity of concepts like structural discrimination, critical race theory, identity fraud and an increasing vehemence in racial politicking enraged my mind*”

[Photography: Glenys Perry]

# Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities

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**Keywords:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, culture, curriculum, indigenous studies, pedagogy, reconciliation, story telling

*I would like to acknowledge the First People of this Country and their contribution as the first custodians of the lands and water ways on which we now live, learn and work. I pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge that these lands have always been lands of teaching and learning.*

Throughout this article, I refer to Australia's First People as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as I would like to acknowledge that there are two distinct groups of people that are Indigenous to Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the First People of Australia. They are a key part of Australia's past, present, and future. The Knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – past and present – should be acknowledged and valued.

## Abstract

**The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) identifies two focus areas that graduate teachers need to be familiar with to be competent to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and all other students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, history, and culture (AITSL, 2017). Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture into pedagogy and practice (Focus Area 1.4, para. 1) and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities can be daunting for educators (Focus Area 2.4, para. 1). While on paper these appear to be two different elements, it is not possible to have one without the other. Being able to effectively embed content relies heavily on meaningful engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families,**

**and communities attached to a school and by developing and maintaining respectful, reciprocal relationships.**

**The following guidelines are based on experience when working closely with and assisting staff at Carlisle Adventist Christian College Early Learning Centre who were exploring ways to connect with Traditional Owners and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Each point identifies general ways that an educator can contextualise ideas and actions to their specific community when beginning to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the school curriculum or engage with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. These are simple steps with practical elements that can easily be explored and implemented.**

## Acknowledge and understand your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Country and community

Aboriginal people are from mainland Australia; Torres Strait Islanders are from the 274 islands that make up the Torres Strait Region, north of Australia. Many Indigenous Australians have family ties and connections to both groups. Each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group is different. They live on different Countries, they have different languages, their history is complex and there is diversity in their ceremonies, traditions, and culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives are bound up in Country. Country is 'the land'. It is the flora and fauna and the stories that connect people to place. It is integral to identity. Identity is influenced by language and culture. Identity is influenced by family and belonging to a kinship system – a complex family-like support system where each member has different roles, obligations, and responsibilities to one another. Belonging to a kinship system demonstrates that connection to culture, language, and Country (Quinn & Bobongie-Harris, 2021).

Understanding your community context is about understanding the history of the land on which you live and the people who have come to live there. Policy has played an important part in determining where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are situated and how communities have evolved. Rather than make assumptions based on generalisations and stereotypes, it is the responsibility of educators to connect with Traditional Owners and understand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history in the community in which they live and work from their own perspective. Part of this will help you identify the correct terminology to use in your community. In the larger geographical sense, educators might hear the words: Murrie (QLD), Koori, (NSW), Nunga (SA) or Noongar (WA) (Quinn & Bobongie-Harris, 2021).



Figure 1. Uncle George (Traditional Owner) Yuwibara Country) and Fiona Mann-Bobongie (Traditional Owner Darumbal Country)

## Practice

It is important that you know and understand the difference between an Acknowledgement of Country and a Welcome to Country. A Welcome to Country is given by a Traditional Owner of the Country on which you work and live. Arranging a Welcome to Country can be overwhelming. Each community has their own

Traditional Owners that have a responsibility to give a Welcome to Country. Traditional Owners are not obligated to give a Welcome to Country, particularly if a relationship does not exist. Anyone can give an Acknowledgement of Country – teachers, parents, and students. This does not have to be formal. You are simply acknowledging that you are standing on the lands or Country of the Traditional Owners of where you live.

In 1995, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags were proclaimed official flags of Australia and fly beside the National flag. Something as simple and small as flying both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags is a big gesture. It is a visible way to show your support for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of your community.

For communication purposes, use a capital C when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Country (lands). For example: Darumbal Country, Yuwibara Country, Butchulla Country. These are all Proper Nouns. Hearing words and using words are two different things. Only use terminology that is recommended to you by your community.

## Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP):

A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) is a framework for your organisation that supports the National Reconciliation Movement. A RAP supports and guides the development of strong respectful relationships and meaningful opportunities when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A RAP includes practical actions that drives an organisation's contribution to reconciliation in the communities where they operate (Reconciliation Australia, 2021).

## Practice

Putting together a RAP requires honest reflection by the staff and the school on their current practices in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. A RAP also requires significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input. How do you acknowledge and reconcile with a group of people without giving them a seat at the table? Consultation should be with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in your community. This may include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, Traditional Owners and can also include representatives from other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups who live in the community, particularly if they have a long history with your school. Guidelines for a RAP can be found online at Reconciliation Australia (2021).

## Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives:

Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

*It is important that you know and understand the difference between an Acknowledgement of Country and a Welcome to Country.*

*Being able to effectively embed content relies heavily on meaningful engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities*

perspectives requires the creation of a third cultural space where these two knowledge systems can work side by side and the history and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is respectfully reflected in the school through community involvement and culturally sensitive practices (Nakarta 2007; Department of Education and Training, 2011). Educators should already be open to the fact that children learn and succeed differently and understand these differences within the specific context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who are expected to move between both Western and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge Systems, and experience success.

Literature and research suggest that embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges and perspectives encourages an openness to diverse perspectives, enhances all children and young people's educational experience and assists in the authentic advancement of Reconciliation. The following three ways of learning: *storytelling*, *yarning* and *deep listening* are interactive, and familiar to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students. These are a good way to begin the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and pedagogy.

*Storytelling* is integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. It is part of daily interaction and imparts knowledge from one generation to the other (Bobongie, 2017). Stories are the sharing of lived experiences and a means of reciprocal educating and learning. *Storytelling* is an essential tool for

the survival and empowerment of Indigenous Knowledges, cultures, and identities (Hromek, 2019). *Yarning* is information sharing. It is unstructured in-depth conversations in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share stories and Knowledges. There are many complexities and layers to *yarning* (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). When used in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, *yarning* is a culturally safe and impartial way of learning (Barlo et al., 2020). *Deep listening* is a big part of *yarning* that allows you to hear in a different way. It involves both verbal and non-verbal communication – listening to what is NOT said. It pays attention to the spaces, the gaps, and silences between parts of what is shared and said. *Deep listening* is taking a minute to breathe and connect, to build relationships and establish trust. To focus and concentrate on what is really trying to be said (Ungunmerr, 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members should be invited to share their understanding of *storytelling*, *yarning* and *deep listening* to model how these operate within their own context.

### Practice

A *yarning circle* is a place where *storytelling*, *yarning* and *deep listening* takes place. A *yarning circle* can be a fixed space in the classroom or school, or it can be moved and set up in different places. It is important that this is a safe space where everyone is comfortable and can speak and be heard.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogical

practices that educators can explore further include, but aren't limited to, Yunkaporta's (2009) 8 ways pedagogy, Uncle Ernie's holistic approach (Queensland Department of Education, 2016), and Both Ways or Two Ways Pedagogy (Purdie et al., 2011).

### Develop and maintain reciprocal relationships between the school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Developing relationships within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities takes some time. Each community is different. They have different processes and protocols which need to be understood and respected. Educators have a responsibility to create culturally safe places for their children where they are encouraged to share their history and stories, working in intercultural ways through informed pedagogy and practice. It is the responsibility of the educator to understand complex kinship systems and cultural connections, engaging in reciprocal relationships between schools and community. Cultural responsiveness demonstrates a genuine commitment to understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their perspectives in all facets of education.

### Practice

Connect with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in your school. Ask them about the right processes and protocols when connecting with the community. Provide social occasions where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and staff can get together and share with each other and develop parent/teacher relationships. Where opportunities present themselves, employ qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, not as a tokenistic gesture, but because their knowledge and their relationships with Country and community are valued.

### Where do you begin?

Communities and schools are all different. This article is a guide, a potential starting point based on one Early Learning Centre's experience. The engagement strategies listed are not the only ways to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into your school or engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities. Each strategy should not be treated as a standalone; educators are invited to explore the interconnectedness between them. Take some time to reflect on your own practice and see where some of these strategies might work for you.

This article was written on Yuwibara Country – Mackay, North Queensland. TEACH

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I would like to acknowledge Traditional Owners of Yuwibara Country Uncle George Tonga and Antwinette Vanderwolf and Traditional Owner of Darumbal Country, Fiona Mann-Bobongie for their assistance throughout the course of this project.

“storytelling, yarning and deep listening ... these are a good way to begin the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and pedagogy.”

“Educators ... create culturally safe places for their children where they are encouraged to share their history and stories, working in intercultural ways through informed pedagogy and practice.”



Figure 2. On-Country Professional Experience for Carlisle Adventist Christian College Early Learning Centre staff with Uncle George and Antwinette (Traditional Owners Yuwibara Country) and Fiona Mann-Bobongie (Traditional Owner Darumbal Country).

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# Research from the inside: One teacher's research journey within a school setting

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**Key words:** Bias, insider research, qualitative research, reflexivity, positionality

## Abstract

**In a secular society such as Australia, why are more and more parents sending their children to faith-based schools? This question led me to pursue PhD research exploring the reasons why parents choose faith-based schools. As I began my research I was confronted with unexpected complexities of researching my own setting. Researching one's own professional context or occupational setting is known as insider research and this type of research is becoming increasingly common, especially in the field of Education. This paper explores some of the experiences I encountered as an insider researcher, and I present typical advantages and challenges associated with insider research. I also provide a discussion of the importance of reflexivity for insider researchers. By acknowledging the issues inherent with insider research, the usefulness of studying one's own setting will be evident. I conclude that teacher-driven insider research is valuable to understanding of the practice of Education.**

## Introduction

There has been a rise in the popularity of faith-based schools in Australia over recent years and this seems to be counter-intuitive given that western culture, and Australian culture in particular, is considered secular and has been since Federation, 1901. According to the Australian Bureau 34.4% of students in 2020 were enrolled in non-government schools. Furthermore, according to Independent Schools Council of Australia (2020), 84% of all non-government schools had a faith affiliation in 2019.

My interest in parental reasons for school choice stemmed from my fifteen years teaching in a faith-based school system. During this time I heard, anecdotally, many and varied reasons parents gave

for sending their children to a faith-based school. Reasons such as desiring a caring environment, the explicit teaching of family values, academic rigour and value for money were commonly expressed by parents. These sentiments came from parents with a faith-based background but also, interestingly, from parents who claimed they had no faith affiliation. From these informal interactions I began my PhD research. Expanding from investigating only the school where I was employed as a teacher, I included three other schools from the same faith-based school system. Two schools were from urban regions and two were from rural regions.

The research question I chose is a critical element that guides my entire research: An exploration into the factors that influence parents when choosing a faith-based school. The research question chosen was intimately related to my work as a secondary teacher within a faith-based school system. Flick (2009) purports that research questions,

do not come from nowhere. In many cases, their origin lies in the researchers' personal biographies and their social context. The decision about a specific question mostly depends on the researchers' practical interests and their involvement in certain social and historical contexts. (p. 98)

The research question drives the research design and I decided that a mixed methods approach would be used, both quantitative and qualitative methods, to help answer the research question. The mixed methods process would enable me to glean a more comprehensive understanding than using a single method (Biesta, 2017; Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017). Furthermore, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative phases in research provides greater insight into a phenomenon than either could do alone (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A survey was used to collect quantitative data where respondents could opt in to

participate in interviews to delve deeper into their school choice decisions. Using purposeful sampling twenty-one parents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. This paper will focus on insider research as it related to my experience in the collection of qualitative data.

## Insider research

Insider research is research that is conducted within the researcher's own context or setting. Sikes and Potts (2008) clarify that this research is from "an individual's own professional or occupational group" (p. 3). Greene (2014) explains that insider research "is that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member" (p. 1). Insider research has become increasingly more common especially in the area of educational research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Mercer, 2007). Greene (2014) asserts that this rise is a consequence of professional doctorates such as Doctor of Education, as opposed to PhD programs, where teachers are involved in researching their own educational institutions.

Outsider research, on the other hand, is research conducted by a researcher that has no connection with the setting being researched. Indeed, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) describe outsider researchers as "onlookers" where their "relationship to the setting is detached and neutral" (p. 60). There is a certain objectivity implied here that is seen as a type of protective armour against the pitfalls of subjectivity in research that is inherent within insider research.

It is important to appreciate that it is possible for a researcher to be an insider researcher as well as an outsider researcher simultaneously or fluidly during the course of their research (Halilovich, 2014; Hellawell, 2006). Hellawell (2006) states that "there may be some elements of insiderness on some dimensions of your research and some elements of outsidersness on other dimensions" (p. 490). This is certainly evident in my research. For example, I am an insider within the school where I am employed, but an outsider to the other three schools that are part of the research. I am also an insider to the parents that are affiliated with the same faith as I. This also makes me an outsider to parents who have another faith affiliation or no faith affiliation.

Positionality is closely tied to the understanding of what it means to be an insider researcher. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) interpret positionality as the "position from which we see the world around us" (p. 1) and that it impacts all aspects of research. It is suggested that the positionality of the researcher changes during the qualitative research process. It is accepted by many scholars that researcher positionality is rarely static and indeed is fluid along

the research continuum (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Hellawell, 2006; Hoare, Buetow, Mills, & Francis, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Ross, 2017). Herr and Anderson (2015) explain the positionality of a researcher as "a continuum of positionalities" (p. 41) or "gradations" (p. 52) and assert that "each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect" (p.55).

Much is discussed in the literature about the advantages and the challenges of insider research (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Hellawell, 2006; Mercer, 2007; Sikes & Potts, 2008; Unluer, 2012). Some of these advantages and challenges will be discussed in this paper as I encountered them in my research.

## Advantages of insider research

There are strong arguments in the literature that outline the advantages of being an insider researcher. Three common advantages of insider research include easier access to participants, cultural understanding and intimate organisational knowledge that it affords (Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014; Mercer, 2007).

Writers such as Atkins and Wallace (2012), Greene (2014) and Mercer (2007) claim that being an insider can provide **easier access to participants**. In this research being an insider, a member of the school system, certainly provided easier access to each school. Each school principal was amenable to my request in accessing parents to participate in interviews. In fact, each principal gave me access to their personal assistant or receptionist who supported me in contacting parents. Some personal assistants even went so far as to email interview reminders to parents. I was also able to negotiate the use of an interview room at each school with ease with the help of the personal assistant or receptionist. This way there were no double bookings of the room and each parent was escorted into the room efficiently.

Atkins and Wallace (2012) state that participants are more likely to participate with research and participants may disclose more because they feel comfortable with an insider researcher. This was certainly the case in the school where I work. The number of parents that were agreeable to participating in interviews at my school was the most of all schools, almost double the number of the other urban school which had similar student numbers. The rural schools in my research had less students enrolled and also had less parents opting into the interview process. However, there were enough parents to conduct useful qualitative interviews. Some parent participants seemed more comfortable discussing their school choices with me because they knew that I was a teacher within the school system. Many were enthusiastically open about the

“As I began my research I was confronted with unexpected complexities of researching my own setting”

“It is important to appreciate that it is possible for a researcher to be an insider as well as an outsider researcher simultaneously or fluidly”

reasons for their school choice; others needed some prompting to open up about their experiences.

Another important advantage of being an insider researcher is the **cultural understanding** that it provides (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Greene, 2014; Heslop, Burns, & Lobo, 2018; Unluer, 2012). Chavez (2008) explains that “Insiders can understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants” (p. 481). In this research it was certainly advantageous to understand the faith-based culture of the schools. I understood the context of the schools I was researching. I knew the historical context of each school and I was certainly aware of the faith-based culture of the schools. I found that I was able to relate to parents that were faith-based themselves and to understand intimately why they chose the school. I was also able to probe deeper to understand why parents of other world faiths and parents that were not affiliated to any faith chose the school for their child. I was able to use faith-based language with those parents who were familiar with the language, but I was also aware that I needed to avoid faith-based jargon with those parents who were unfamiliar with faith-based language. Understanding the culture of the school allowed me to garner information that would seem foreign to someone outside of the faith-based culture of the school.

Also, another advantage of insider research is the **organisational knowledge** that it grants (Floyd & Arthur, 2012; Greene, 2014; Ross, 2017). Mercer (2007) explains that insider researchers have a better understanding of the setting and context of their research and importantly a knowledge of useful avenues of enquiry (p. 6). Chavez (2008) adds that insider researchers “possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field” (p. 481). There is no need to orientate oneself about the research environment or its operational structure. As an insider, a teacher within the school system, I understood the organisational structure of the school and this was useful in ascertaining who to contact to enable the research to be conducted. I had easy access to the appropriate staff who would provide me with access to interview rooms and facilities that I may need during my visit. I was able to work within the school’s daily program as I was acutely aware of school schedules and time constraints. I was also able to schedule all parent interviews during school hours and some parents were grateful for being able to conduct their interview soon after drop off in the morning or close to pick up in the afternoon. Others were happy to come during the school day, when available. I was able to discuss the year levels of children and where this fitted in with their school choice decisions. I was able to discuss reasons of choice with parents if they

differed between primary school and high school. Some parents of primary school aged children had different reasons for choosing a primary school to a high school.

Understanding the organisation of the school system I was able to probe deeper into the reasons why parents would have different reasons for choosing primary school versus high school. These nuanced responses could be missed by an outside researcher who does not have intimate organisational knowledge.

My experience of insider research was that there were advantages to my research, including the practical aspects of access, cultural understanding and organisational knowledge. Sikes and Potts (2008) summarise these advantages well,

... inside researchers readily know the language of those being studied, along with its particular jargon and are more likely to empathise with those they study because of in-depth understanding of them... are often more willing to discuss private knowledge with those who are personally part of their world, are often more likely to understand the events under investigation... Inside researchers find that those they study are often more likely to volunteer information to them than they would to outsiders (p. 177).

#### Challenges of insider research

Equally strong arguments are provided in the literature that outline the challenges that insider research brings to qualitative research. Three commonly cited challenges are bias, role duality and power relationships (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Ross, 2017; Unluer, 2012).

Insider **bias**, where a researcher’s own beliefs and experiences can influence results, is an important consideration. Preconceptions and assumptions can creep into analysis of research and taint conclusions. Greene (2014) reminds the researcher that “The insider researcher must then be wary of projecting one’s own views onto participants, or the data analysis” (p. 4). Patton (2002) claims that neutrality, the absence of bias, is not easily attained but that “all credible research strategies include techniques for helping the investigator become aware of and deal with selective perception, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions” (p. 51). Seidman (2006) exhorts researchers to “let the interview breathe and speak for itself” (p. 117). Throughout the interview process I made a concerted effort to avoid potential biases from entering research results by allowing the interviewee to speak with little interruption or direction from the researcher.

However, I concede that bias may not have been completely eliminated. I had to be conscious of

assuming I knew what the interviewees meant when they were sharing their experiences. I became aware that the parent, at times, needed to explain what they meant in more detail. For example, it became clear that the term ‘values’ was used differently by parents and there was no consensus on the meanings intimated by parents. It was important that I probed the interviewee to gain a clear understanding of what they actually meant when using the term ‘values’ in the interview, rather than place my own interpretations on meaning.

**Role duality** is another challenge of which insider researchers must be aware. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) warn that “... insider researchers are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims, and identification dilemmas” (p. 70). Role duality, in this research being researcher-teacher, was certainly a consideration in my research. I was the researcher in one role and a teacher in another role. My role in one of the schools being researched was well-known. Naturally, some parents of the school have had direct interaction with me as a classroom teacher and Year Advisor. I had taught and/or been the Year Advisor for three of the parents interviewed. This was a challenge for me with familiarity with some parents. Inasmuch as this can be an advantage in creating easy rapport, I was keenly aware that the participant may assume that I would have certain knowledge and not provide the explicit detail needed. This did happen at times with statements such as “you know” and “you know what I mean”. However, being aware of this potential issue, I was able to ask the participant to explain elements that had been only vaguely mentioned. Occasionally, this familiarity was felt with some parents wanting to chat about their child or school issues that were unrelated to my research. When this occurred, I gently had to redirect discussion back to the research.

The challenge of role duality was not as acutely felt in the other three schools under research. I was not a teacher at those schools, however, in my introduction letters I did identify myself as a teacher and PhD researcher. This insider duality did become an issue when a parent would deviate from the topic of school choice and divert the conversation to problems they had encountered at the school as they thought that I was in a position to help them resolve it. This happened with at least one parent from each school. In this situation I encouraged the parent to directly contact the appropriate staff member at the school and redirected the interview back to my research.

**Power relationships** can exist between the researcher and those being researched. This may result in a situation where the participant may

feel obligated or coerced to give information that they feel the researcher wants to hear. Greene (2014) encourages insider researchers to “work at impression management to establish respect and avoid a power struggle with participants” (p. 6). To mitigate this potential issue, it was important that each participant understood their personal agency. I was intentional in stating to each parent that they should only answer questions they feel comfortable answering and they can discuss whatever they would like to discuss about their school choice experience. I also clearly articulated that the participant was able to withdraw from the interview at any time. Another example of the problem of power relationships in this type of research is that interviewees can also omit information that they feel may compromise them in some way. However, the parent interpretation of power relationships can be difficult to ascertain but should be acknowledged as a possibility. Data was also collected from schools where parents had no direct connection to me. In this situation there was a researcher-respondent relationship rather than researcher-parent relationship. I addressed any potential concerns by explaining the purpose of the research to the participant and how confidentiality would be preserved.

Bias, role duality and power relationships are a few of the challenging aspects of insider research. As an insider researcher I encountered these in the qualitative phase of my research and used various techniques to maintain research integrity. However, rather than avoid or discount the complexity this added to my research I negotiated my positionality within the research and began to reflect on its impact and practise reflexivity.

#### Reflexivity

Acknowledging the challenges of insider research allows the researcher to consciously reflect on positionality and the research process. Holmes (2020) points out that positionality acknowledges the researcher’s worldview and how this impacts their research. Hellawell (2006) suggests that recognising one’s positionality is a necessary component of insider research, stating “this ability objectively to stand outside one’s own writing, and to be reflexive about it, and about one’s own relation to it, are some of the hallmarks of a good thesis” (p. 483). Reflexivity can be a useful tool to understanding and recognising the dichotomy of insider/outsider research. Creswell (2007) explains that reflexivity “...means the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study” (p. 243). Hellawell (2006) and Greene (2014) urge researchers to practise reflexivity in their research. Brannick and Coghlan

“nuanced responses could be missed by an outside researcher who does not have intimate organisational knowledge.”

“Another example of the problem of power relationships in this ... research is that interviewees can also omit information that they feel may compromise them.”

(2007) add that reflexivity is intimately involved with exploring and dealing with the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) provide a useful reflexive tool, a Social Identity Map, to help researchers identify their positionality. Their Social Identity Map provides tiers with categories to fill in to help researchers recognise “how we approach, investigate, and analyze data” (p. 8). Furthermore, the authors point out, “Mapping our social identity is by no means the end to understanding our positionality but instead is a starting point and a tool to help researchers be explicitly reflexive about their positionality” (p. 3). The Social Identity Map is only one method of supporting reflexivity within research.

I appreciate that reflexivity is not always easy, but I have attempted to be reflexive in my research. This was done by contemplating and acknowledging my position within the research and identifying methodological considerations (Greene, 2014). I acknowledged my position as a teacher in one of the schools within the study. I recognised the bias at the beginning of the research by acknowledging that I am a member of the faith-based organisation that is aligned with the research. Although there may have been concerns about impartiality and participant relationship before the start of the research, in practice, an insight into the faith-based worldview and having a status of membership worked to the advantage of participant relationships. Oftentimes, trust was established quickly on grounds of mutual understanding of the school system or faith connection. I also used the Social Identity Map to visualise and better understand my positionality within my research. This method certainly allowed me to reduce some of the challenges such as bias and assumptions whilst conducting interviews. While strict boundaries of protocol were maintained, I am confident that interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere where every effort was made to ensure participants felt valued.

### Conclusion

This paper is not meant to provide an exhaustive literature review of insider research. It is not meant to provide significant methodological considerations pertaining to insider research. Nor is it meant to report on the results of my research conducted as insider research into school choice in a faith-based setting. The purpose of this paper is to simply share my experience of educational research as an insider and to contemplate where this research sits within my context. My musings may certainly not be typical of another researcher’s experience, even within the same context, researching the same question. However, it is my desire that my insider research into

school choice will make a significant contribution to understanding parental reasons for sending their child to a faith-based school.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on and share my experience as an insider researcher. Understanding the concept of insider research or “practitioner enquiry” (Hellowell, 2006, p. 484) is particularly pertinent to my research as a teacher enquiring about parental reasons for school choice perceptions within a faith-based school system where I am employed. I have provided a discussion of three advantages and three challenges that I experienced in the course of my research. I also assert, however, that despite all efforts to the contrary, a neutral qualitative researcher is a fallacy and there is no denying the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, influence of researcher’s identity and worldview (Holmes, 2020). Finally, as Herr and Anderson (2015) aptly claim and I concur, “... that knowledge production from all positions is valid as long as one is honest and reflective about one’s multiple positionality” (p. 48). Rather than being afraid of an intimate connection with one’s own research setting, I hope that this discussion provides valid reasons as to why research into one’s own setting is useful and, indeed, valuable to academic discourse.

As I reflect on my own research process, I can say that researching my own setting, in this case the school system where I am employed, has been an enjoyable experience, that has contributed to my own professional development. My research has certainly benefited from the advantages of researching my own setting, but it has also forced me to appreciate and overtly acknowledge the challenges that are inherently embedded within this type of research. I hope that my journey with school-based insider research provides a springboard for further interest in teacher-driven research within your own school setting. **TEACH**

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## Growing wellbeing

### Peter Beamish

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**Keywords:** Adolescent, connectedness, COVID-19, mental health, relationships, wellbeing

**Mental health has been identified as an issue of national concern in the Mission Australia's Youth Survey. From 2016 to 2018, the proportion of young people identifying mental health as an issue of national importance doubled, rising from 21% in 2016 to 43% in 2018 (Carlisle, et al., 2018). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created an environment where poor mental health was exacerbated for many. In the 2020 Youth Survey, youth indicated that their top three concerns were: coping with stress, mental health and body image and their biggest personal issues were education, mental health and COVID-19 (Tiller et al., 2020). In the 2021 survey, over half (51.5%) of youth nominated mental health as a barrier to achieving their study or work goals, which is a large increase considering that only 16.6% of students identified mental health as a barrier in 2019 (Tiller et al., 2021).**

As schools are looking to offer post-COVID education they need to recognise students at risk and help those who are struggling with their mental health and consequent low levels of personal wellbeing in a very important way. Feeling connected to their school through positive inter-student and student/teacher relationships has been found to positively impact student wellbeing (DES, 2013). High levels of school connectedness help students to feel socially, emotionally and physically safe in schools (Cohen et al., 2009) and leads to a greater sense of belonging. As schools assist students to rebound from the COVID pandemic, this area of connectedness should be a focus and its importance is reflected in its inclusion

in the World Health Organisation's whole of school approach to enhancing student wellbeing (Goldberg et al., 2019).

Establishing trusting and supportive relationships (Payne, 2018) builds school connectedness for students and is positively associated with academic achievement, peer and teacher relationships, and emotional wellbeing (Riekie, 2016).

High levels of school connectedness lead to a greater sense of belonging, which, in turn, leads to more prosocial behaviours for both teachers and students. As the needs of both teachers and students are met, students become more connected to the school's values and goals, more likely to adopt school norms and rules, and generally report positive school and learning experiences (Payne, 2018). In this way better school connectedness is linked to increased



Images: Selected from NNSW and Greater Sydney Adventist Schools image files



Images: Selected from NNSW and Greater Sydney Adventist Schools image files

engagement at school, higher levels of academic achievement, and reductions in anti-social or disruptive behaviours (Australian Catholic University & Erebus International, 2008, p. 68, 69).

So as many students who are doing it a bit tough with respect to their mental health return to school campuses after COVID closures, how do schools increase school connectedness? Establishing trusting and supportive relationships between students and between students and teachers is an important step (Riekie, 2016). Now is the time for schools to reach out and offer support through a focus on quality relationships. In a practical sense, Shochet and Orr (2017) describe how teachers can build quality relationships as they greet students by using their names and focus on being fully engaged when talking to students. Teachers can get to know student interests and engage students in conversation about them. They can acknowledge positive student progress and express delight in student discoveries. Teachers can show appreciation for students' help and join with them in extra curricula activities. These small gestures help build positive teacher-student relationships that help build connectedness.

In considering learning tasks, adopting a 'strengths approach' increases engagement and "Recent research has highlighted the importance of 'student voice' in giving students a sense of meaning and connectedness to the curriculum" (ACU & EI, 2008, p. 69) so enhancing their sense of purpose and wellbeing.

In a post-COVID world connectedness is particularly important in helping students to navigate some tricky parts of their life journey—

dealing with challenges and transitions—contributing to empowering them to remove barriers to their success (Harding et al., 2019).

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“connectedness is particularly important in helping students to navigate some tricky parts of their life”

“From 2016 to 2018, the proportion of young people identifying mental health as an issue of national importance doubled, ... from 21% ... to 43%”

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# A journey of cultural change

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**Keywords:** Autoethnography, change, culture, inclusion, reconciliation

## Abstract

**This article describes collaborative autoethnographic reflections on the meaning of our decade-long journey as a school community towards reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This has resulted in a heartening cultural change driven by the school's strong, faith-based commitment to reconciliation and the desire to make an incredibly complex issue accessible for children and young people.**

**A powerful change took place when we invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into our community to tell their story and true growth occurred when our students moved from the position of spectators to participators. Reconciliation events are now a permanent part of our school calendar. The many cultures that make up our community, but especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritages, are celebrated in authentic ways. Our students led the process and have developed pride in their identity, finding their voice among peers.**

## Introduction

Schools are communities which often function as cultures (Hughes, 2017). Culture can be defined as “a shared set of meanings or a cognitive map of meanings” that shape attitudes, values, beliefs and actions (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 157). As society changes, so too can a school community in response to new understandings and directions in education (Pendergast, Bahr & Main, 2017). Indeed, in the last ten years, educators have been increasingly challenged to design learning that focuses on 21st

century skills that prepare students for a somewhat unknown future (Mathew, 2018).

In 2008, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, set goals for future focused education that included the promotion of “*equity and excellence*”, with a commitment to “*improving the educational outcomes for Indigenous youth*” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MYCEEETA], 2008, p. 6). Following this, the Australian Curriculum was rolled out with the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures as a Cross Curriculum Priority to be taught across all subjects to help close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learning outcomes by providing more culturally accessible and accurate curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012). Closing the gap, has been a strong theme in Australia, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.3% of the population, and remain the most marginalised Australians with over 30% living below the poverty line (Community Affairs References Committee [CARC], 2004; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). This change in curriculum created a challenge in educational settings as teachers sought to embed this new Cross Curriculum Priority across year levels and subjects. In recognition of this as a curriculum requirement and underpinned by the school's strong faith-based commitment to reconciliation, Suncoast Christian College, along with schools across Australia began the journey of cultural change.

## Methodology

As school leaders we have been working within our school community to create cultural change over

the last decade. More recently, we have had an increasing number of schools reach out to discuss the reconciliation projects and partnerships that are helping to shape and change our school culture. In response to this, we set aside time to actively reflect on our past, present and vision for the future, and in doing so, became aware of the sociological concepts of individual story inextricably linked to culture (Chang, 2008). This led us to explore autoethnography as a process that enabled us to tell our story of social change from within the community, whilst inspiring us to reflect as we actively interpreted our journey (Chang, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Wall, 2008).

Ethnography involves the study of human society or culture (Merriam, 1998; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Autoethnography is an ethnography with the explicit addition of ‘auto’, or self, making it an ethnography written by and about the researchers as members of the culture being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Autoethnography is a methodology that enables the researcher to tell a story, inviting potential readers to become co-participants in the researchers’ experience of a larger social or cultural context (Wall, 2008).

Drawing on the centrality of story within autoethnography, we spent time separately making notes, then came together to tell each other the story as coproducers of a collaborative autoethnography (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). We then co-created a visual representation of our story and its symbolic meanings, which was used to interpret and analyse data, finally settling on the practical steps we took and the deeper themes we uncovered in our own learnings in the journey. Working together enabled us to challenge each other to engage in deeper critical social research (Hughes & Pennington, 2017) and to utilise what Creswell and Poth (2014) describe as the lens of vulnerable, coherent and critical self in data analysis.

The structure of this article is reflective of this collaborative methodological process beginning with: a) our story, then b) our steps, and finally, c) our findings that will inform our future direction as leaders within our school community.

## Our story

As a school community we have been on the journey of reconciliation for more than a decade. It has been a rich and rewarding process despite the many challenges that have arisen. The truth of the proverb, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together” (Barrett, 2018, p. 51), has been integral to the process. It has been a remarkably healthy journey as we have wrestled both with our sense of responsibility to the broader Australian community and our own community as a local school. It has

led us to find new dimensions of meaning in our collaboration and depth of understanding as we have learned to listen, observe and participate beyond the boundaries of our tight knit community. Our journey did start with something very simple, but very profound – a story.

Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody sing a song that has become an anthem of our time, “*From Little things, Big things Grow*” (ABC News, 2014; National Museum Australia, n.d.). It tells the story of an Aboriginal man who was small in stature, but big in courage. Vincent Lingiari, a Gurindji man, along with his people called a rugged piece of country in the Northern Territory home. His people had been custodians of this land until Lord Vestey turned their lives upside down. He was a wealthy Englishman who quickly claimed the land and started using it as if it was his own to farm beef. One day Vincent decided this was not acceptable, so he packed his swag and headed toward Sydney to tell his story. He took every opportunity to talk to anybody who would listen to the story of the Gurindji people and the greed of those who had moved in. His courage eventually led to the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Australian Government, 1976), the basis upon which Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory could claim native title. On 16 August 1975, a small part of their land was handed back to the Gurindji people on a 30-year-lease by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, a symbolic gesture which gave recognition to the loss the people had experienced.

Our journey in joining the reconciliation movement in Australia started by telling this story and many more. We invited our students and staff into the story of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and sought to develop understanding, compassion and empathy for their plight. As a community it took some time to welcome these stories, not as part of political debate, but rather as a community of people who value justice, compassion, faith and love. The stories were told in a compelling manner for the audience to feel as though they themselves were a part of the ongoing story, rather than just hearing about a bleak part of history which we revisit once a year on a special occasion.

An important aspect of the reconciliation project at Suncoast has been the desire to make what is an incredibly complex issue into one that is accessible for children and young people. Our commitment to having reconciliation as a permanent part of our school calendar was matched by a desire to keep it accessible and palatable for our community. At our Reconciliation Assembly in 2014, with the help of a team of people a bridge in the colours of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and the Australian flag was constructed as a metaphor for

“*ATSI people make up 3.3% of the population, and remain the most marginalised Australians with over 30% living below the poverty line*”

“*If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together*”

what is meant by the term reconciliation. The pieces were put together during the ceremony and students were invited to cross the bridge as a symbol of reconciliation. Students were invited to explore their own family heritage and bring a map to the school to place on the bridge as a representation of the many cultures that make up our community.

Along with the telling of story, authentic conversation took place which sought to recognise the place of each individual within the community. Our culture of transparency, authenticity and vulnerability as a community has been critical to the process. The cultural diversity and lived experience of our staff have meant that patience, understanding and active listening have also been integral. The language that has been used has been tempered and considered with the desire to avoid inviting the conversation to become political, but rather presenting it as a value, a way of doing relationship and community that is transformative and effective in bringing a sense of worth in the life of every individual. In this way, the leaders in this process set out to create a space which allowed people to listen and respond to the story at their own pace which has been a key to its success.

A powerful change took place when we invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into our community to tell their story. The students experienced the ceremonies of “Acknowledgement of Country” and “Welcome to Country” and participated curiously as people who also call this place home. They began to understand the depth of beauty that exists in the land that the traditional owners had taken care of for generations. Our visitors introduced us to the rich heritage of our local Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi people. We were introduced to local foods, local places, celebrations, language and laws. We worked hard to be students of culture who showed a deep sense of honour and respect to those who have called this place home for so long. Our guests were generous in their willingness to engage with us as we awkwardly sought to use correct names and terminology in our ceremonies and conversations. Holding the place of humility has allowed our conversations with guests to become conversations with friends over time as we built relationships characterised by trust and mutual regard.

At times, the story has been confronting. As individuals and a community, we have faced the reality of the ignorance and evil that characterises aspects of this story, including the impact of the Stolen Generation, Terra Nullius and history in our local area, such as the story behind “Murdering Creek Road” in Peregian Springs (Windolf, 2013). These stories must be told, and recognition given for the hardship and pain caused. We have also been aware

that while it is important to acknowledge the powerful sense of grief and shame that is invoked, it is a difficult emotional place to stay for too long. However, these stories needed to be heard with opportunities for our community to feel safe and respond in a way that is authentic.

True growth occurred when our students moved from the position of spectators to participators. Opportunities were created for our student leaders to shape and inform how we would engage in the reconciliation movement. They brought the fun and celebration as we designed ways for students to respond following our ceremonies. These important rituals have shaped our understanding of what reconciliation is all about. For example, during Reconciliation Week in 2015, our Year 12 student leaders created a huge hessian sign (Figure 1) and invited each member of the school community to add their handprints in paint to the sign to represent each person’s responsibility in committing to the cause of reconciliation. We are committed to the notion that reconciliation is something we must respond to, and therefore we have created rituals which encourage young people to engage in the process by first creating the opportunity, then a choice to participate.



Figure 1. The hessian handprint sign made by Year 12 students at the 2015 Reconciliation Assembly.

A rewarding part of the journey has been observing a large portion of our community shift from the place of spectator to active participant. Staff have been activated in their strength areas and students have become active in the process of planning and running events and activities. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been involved in leading the process and began to develop pride in their identity and have begun to find their voice among peers. This shift of culture has embedded the reconciliation movement into school life and has made it central to the values and attitudes that define the character of our community.

A high point of the reconciliation journey has been

the creation of sacred spaces within our College which are powerful symbols of reconciliation. It started with the idea of a leaf chair providing a space where people could gather to share ideas, thoughts and beliefs in a safe, peaceful and inspiring space (Suncoast Christian College, 2019). The vision grew and as conversations took place something quite extraordinary resulted. A yarning circle came together, and a mosaic was designed that told the story of people gathering and listening to one another. The integration of the ideas of staff and students under the guidance of a local Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi man, Kerry Neil led to the creation of a beautiful, and unique space which will be enjoyed for many years to come (Suncoast Christian College, 2019) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Local Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi man, Kerry Neil who runs Triballink is part of the journey of cultural change at Suncoast.

This year with a global pandemic on our doorstep we believed it was critical to continue our commitment to the journey we are travelling. The limitations of large gatherings pushed us into more intimate settings where again students were asked to participate under the 2020 national reconciliation theme “In this Together” (Reconciliation Australia, 2020; Reid & Whitfield, 2020). Our expectations were exceeded when the hindrances and barriers that we thought might make things all too difficult, turned into advantage. Individual teachers took on more responsibility, students were engaged deeply and our conversations with our local Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi representative went to new levels.

Our journey has been challenging but has yielded a rewarding shift in our school culture. Our collaborative autoethnographic reflections have helped us identify some of the key ideas and attitudes that guided our work, which may be helpful to others as they gather the courage to lead their own communities on a journey toward reconciliation. These reflections also helped us to identify nine distinct steps that were integral to our community’s reconciliation journey.

### Our steps

Schools are dynamic communities which are constantly changing, adapting and growing. For this reason, it has been important to recognise that the process, including progress towards reconciliation, is both chronological and cyclical in nature. It is critical that we recall the journey that we have been on, in order to ensure that we continue to capitalise on the progress that has been made.

#### 1. Create a culture of story telling

From children to adults, everyone loves a story. Beginning with the stories of our past as a nation and local community invites people of all ages to engage with reconciliation, as was the case for us with the story of Vincent Lingardi, for here the power of reconciliation was relayed through song (ReconciliationAus, 2016). By sharing these stories, before long a culture of ‘telling the story’ was created and people began to have familiarity with the authentic narratives of our past.

#### 2. Create a culture of conversation

So often in contemporary society people are afraid to have a conversation about controversial issues such as colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and reconciliation. The next step was to bridge this by having intentional conversations that enabled people to discuss, argue and reflect on issues related to reconciliation without judgment.

#### 3. Create a culture of recognition

There is an irrefutable gap between the life trajectories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC), 2018; OECD, 2019). In educational contexts, despite improvement over the last decade, Indigenous students have 10% lower school attendance, influencing academic outcomes (PMC, 2018, p. 9). The proportion of Indigenous students achieving national minimum standards in literacy and numeracy is 13 – 29 % lower than non-Indigenous students (PMC, 2018, p. 59). The unemployment rate of Indigenous Australians is about three times higher than non-Indigenous Australians (PMC, 2018, p. 78, OECD, 2019, p. 3), with more than 120,000 Indigenous people living below the poverty line (CARC, 2004, p. 302).

From our conversations as a school, an increasing number of people began to recognise the gap and in doing so take a big step towards engaging with the purpose of reconciliation. Through previous steps of storytelling and conversation the recognition of gap was not about guilt, shame or judgment, but rather stopping to acknowledge that Aboriginal and

“ True growth occurred when our students moved from the position of spectators to participators. ”

“ It started with the idea of a leaf chair ... a space where people could gather to share ... in a safe, peaceful and inspiring space ”

Torres Strait Islander Australians are marginalised and that something needs to be done.

**4. Create a cultural ritual**

Cultures use rituals for all manner of purposes, with ritual often functioning as a signifier that defines cultures and subcultures (Lester, 2020). At Suncoast, moving into the next stage of reconciliation, a school cultural ritual needed to be included which led to the decision to put an annual Reconciliation Assembly into the school event calendar. Within any school the calendar of events is already crowded and so adding a whole school event is no small thing. The ritual began small and each year became more significant as it began to include symbols, signifiers, metaphors, membership and, eventually, a sense of legacy.

Over the years flags and bunting were bought, posters and banners constructed. One year a bridge was constructed, another year a hand-print hessian wall was made, and more recently the reconciliation rope. These were associated with themes and, metaphors and symbolised the learnings of each Reconciliation Assembly. Before long there was a sense of legacy attached to these as students remembered their involvement in creating them and the collective meaning attached to the annual ritual of reconciliation.



Figure 3. First Nations male students made their own didgeridoos in a 2-day workshop.

**5. Create a culture of celebration**

Local legend, Steve Irwin famously believed that if you want people to protect something, they have to love it; and in order to love it, they have to touch it (YouTube, 2006). Although he was talking about wildlife, the same applies to culture. People need to experience it to love it.

Our Reconciliation Assembly (ritual) and other events in the calendar began to be about celebrating the beauty of cultural diversity. Aboriginal and Torres



Figure 4. Some of our First Nations students performing at the 2018 Reconciliation Assembly in Djan Durman, on didgeridoos they made.

Strait Islander culture, in particular Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi culture, and multi-cultural representations from New Zealand, Hawaii, Tonga and Cook Islands were included. Community partnerships increased with trainers, teachers, storytellers, dancers, musicians and other people. A growing group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students learnt multi-cultural songs and dances and contributed to events across the school calendar. Being culturally diverse has become something of beauty, something to be proud of, something for the whole school community to celebrate.

**6. Create a culture of active participation**

From celebration the next logical step was to invite active participation. So often the younger generation is described as self-oriented, social-apathists who are unlikely to take action beyond social media likes and shares for issues that do not directly impact them (Hitlin & Salisbury, 2013). In our Reconciliation Assembly we aimed to provide a moment for the community to physically touch reconciliation. In doing so, "voice" became voices as our community mobilised in symbolic action, rather than passively watching or listening to the person or group at the front. Active participation meant people became part of reconciliation, doing something small, instead of listening to the story they became the story.

In a recent project, the reconciliation rope, everyone in the school tied a piece of fabric that represented either personal or national sorry, reconciliation or acknowledgement (Reid & Whitfield, 2020). As each individual tied their piece of fabric onto the rope a symbolic action was taken (see cover image), and the rope represented over 900 people's active participation in the reconciliation journey (Suncoast Christian College, 2020).

**7. Creating cultural places of shared significance**

Every culture has places or spaces of significance (Ujang & Zakariya, 2015). Early in the reconciliation journey, the current Principal, Greg Mattiske worked with local Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi people to create an area of the school set aside for acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and for students to gather together. The Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi name, Djan Durman, meaning pleasant place, was given to this space with the permission of local elders and has gradually become a central meeting place for culture including assemblies and a giant Aboriginal art mural co-created with our students and local Aboriginal artists.



Figure 5. One of the murals in Djan Durman painted by our First Nations students with Aboriginal artists.

At one entrance to Djan Durman is the Reconciliation Space and Yarning Circle which has the mosaic created by over 900 people laying stones in a pattern of significance. It is a permanent space to reconcile, listen, yarn, plan and belong. Students visit it to show their friends the stone they laid. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students designed the mosaic with local Gubbi Gubbi/ Kabi Kabi man, Kerry Neill. The students told the stories of the symbols to the school and continue to visit

Prep and Junior primary classrooms to talk about the meaning of this place and the importance of reconciliation.

**8. Creating cultural movement**

When a stone falls in a pond the ripples move outwards, which is also true for the way a true cultural shift moves beyond the original people. A grassroots natural movement began in classrooms as activities, lessons and even whole units became more embedded with rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and perspectives. Teachers have been increasingly empowered and the teaching and learning documents and practice reflect this. For First Nations' students, this is a vital aspect of having their culture represented in learning environments and to be given an opportunity to develop their cultural identity within our school community (Phillips, 2005).



Figure 6. A student laying a stone in the Reconciliation Space at the 2019 Reconciliation Assembly.

Indigenous student leaders became a necessary role set and as each new group of leaders emerged and was recognised, they influenced the forward moment of our cultural revolution with fresh ideas and initiatives. Accepting and supporting this has been a powerful step in empowering a community of change.

**9. Creating a culture of legacy**

The longer we have been on this journey, the more history we create with our school community. We do not just learn about it; we are part of it. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander alumni come back for our events and know that they have been part of the change; it is their legacy. Their younger siblings take on the mantle that was left by students who have graduated. As they step up into roles of leadership they do so with confidence and a deep sense of purpose that has emerged from people that they both knew and admired. The path has been paved and the

“Active participation meant people became part of reconciliation, doing something small, instead of listening to the story they became the story.”

“A grassroots natural movement began in classrooms as activities, lessons and even whole units became more embedded with rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and perspectives.”

road can be walked with a stronger sense of their own value and identity as indigenous young people.

These steps have been undertaken over considerable time and have been intentionally undertaken to invite as many on the journey who are willing to be involved. As a result of this approach the community has taken ownership of the process and a deeper understanding of reconciliation has evolved. Our findings have been evidence of profound growth and transformation within the community.

### Our findings

As the school community has walked this journey toward reconciliation, we have recognised that although much ground has been gained, there is still so much more work to be done. Reconciliation takes place in the heart of individuals and communities and the desire to see a community that is committed to this end is ongoing. Whilst we still have so much to learn, the learning that has been undertaken has led us toward what we consider to be six key findings to contribute to this process that will shape our current and future aspirations for reconciliation.

**Moving from telling the story to being part of the story** Reconciliation requires an examination of our own thoughts and attitudes, which is both deeply personal and sometimes confronting. There is a need for our values and beliefs to align with our actions. As students were invited to play their part in the process many were inspired to 'be the change'. They were empowered by the thought that their actions and response personally, had an impact on the whole community. They were inspired with the idea that they could be a part of writing their own history by choosing to be a part of something truly profound.

### Avoidance becomes generosity

We have seen a quiet revolution in teachers embracing reconciliation events and projects. In general, teachers rightfully guard learning time within the constant time balancing act of schools. They prioritise what is of highest value for the learner and actively avoid distractions. As the cultural movement at Suncoast has developed, rituals such as the Reconciliation Assembly have moved from an event of low relevance to one of high importance. Teachers are increasingly generous in their flexibility, adaptability and time release for students to participate in events. Beyond this, teachers from Prep – Year 12 generously assist in supporting the organisation of events. They prepare their classes and are overtly supportive, getting involved, encouraging student leaders and making a point of thanking our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners.

At a classroom level, more and more learning

across subjects and year levels is richly embedded with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives. Our teachers seek professional development opportunities and partnerships and are hungry to learn more. When Triballink (2020) released its online Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi teaching resources webpage a third of our teachers asked to have subscriptions. The shift from avoidance to generosity has been natural and authentic and is an example of people choosing to participate in the reconciliation story.

### The importance of listening

At the heart of this project has been a determination to engage in meaningful collaboration both within the school community and beyond. True reconciliation requires that people have been heard and understood, something that is particularly challenging for a diverse and multicultural community. A willingness to let go of one's own assumptions and generously engage with others does take time and energy but it is integral for the process to be meaningful, or perhaps even transformational. The spirit of a yarning circle reflects the approach that has been taken throughout the process and has been integral to its success (Yunkaporta, 2012). As Australian Sociologist, Hugh Mackay (2019), writes, "listening to someone is not only one of the most generous acts we can perform for another person; it's also one of the most courageous" (para. 6).

### Protect, challenge, work with existing school culture

Schools have their own socio-cultural contexts that shape participatory relationships within socio-ecologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Within any school there is a vision, strategic plan, goals, protocols and priorities that influence the direction, tone and culture. Some of these are established at leadership levels, some of these are enacted values and virtues. We have learnt that it is important to find ways of working that fit within our own school culture. For instance, Suncoast is known for its high-quality events, so having events works well within the culture. Choosing to embrace unity and the cultural flow within the school have been key to high participation and connection from stakeholders within the organisation. Over time this has led to Reconciliation becoming part of the strategic goals of the school.

The Principal, Greg Mattiske, has strongly supported, guided and participated in the various stages of the reconciliation journey. For us, working with his vision for the school, being protective of what we love about the school and finding ways to weave expressions of reconciliation into the fabric of our school culture have been imperative.

### Having the courage to take risks

Stepping into projects that were new and innovative meant that courage was required. The risk of poor community engagement, interrupting an already busy calendar, offending or simply making a mess in attempting to create something meaningful were all very real, however the reward for such efforts were felt by our community. The engagement of the whole school community in projects such as the Reconciliation Space and Yarning Circle has ultimately led to a sense of pride and ownership of the reconciliation process. It has become symbolic of our whole community's commitment to the process and given our indigenous students a profound sense of achievement and affirmation as to their cultural identity.

### Building trust

Trust has been a pillar of our cultural journey. In the early stages this involved earning the trust of school leadership to step into somewhat unfamiliar ground. The "little things" of the early days were big steps forward in building trust within the school community.

Gradually we gained greater buy-in and more people became involved. We increasingly found ourselves in the position of having to trust our staff, volunteers and students. As an extension of trust this meant letting people work to their strengths, being open to their ideas and bringing our volunteers together as team. This is evidenced in the magnitude of what has been achieved in projects. The sheer number of individuals that have chosen to be involved in the process over the years is evidence of the community's trust and engagement.

### Conclusion

Our journey began with an earnest desire to engage our school community in more meaningful and authentic reconciliation as Australians. This required a change in the school's culture which would only come through more robust and honest engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, identities and heritages. Remarkably this has been achieved, by starting small ("from little things, big things grow") and through thoughtful, sensitive planning, the invitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into our community to tell their story and position our students and staff as participators rather than spectators. It has taken time, but true cultural momentum has been attained. We do recognise that the path to reconciliation is a long road which requires a sustained and committed approach, our progress however, inspires us to continue on this learning journey. Collaborative autoethnography has helped us delve deeper into our learnings, our narrative and our vision for the future. Perhaps the

most satisfying development has been the fact that our students with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage have found pride in their identity and a voice among peers at Suncoast. **TEACH**

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**Haley Whitfield** is the Director of Teaching & Learning at Suncoast Christian College. Haley has been a member of the Suncoast team for five years during which time she has focused on refining curriculum alignment, assessment practices and pedagogical approaches. She has a heart for people, community, culture and for every person to know their worth. With a creative background, Haley has strived to create places and spaces for culturally inclusive education to grow and for the whole school to celebrate cultural diversity.

**Greg Mattiske** is the Principal at Suncoast Christian College, and has led the school in an exciting new phase of growth and innovation. He has actively worked with his teams to create dynamic learning by introducing an LMS, collaborative teaching, flexible learning space and a renewed energy amongst staff for the distance travelled by every student. With rapidly increasing student numbers, Greg has initiated a master building plan that has a sustainability, collaboration and inclusion focus.

# Where to go for a Christian research degree [Part 1]

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**Keywords:** Higher education, postgraduate, research, higher research degree (HDR) candidates

**Abstract**

**An institution's support of higher degree research (HDR) candidates engages the supervisor/s and the candidate in a professional learning and teaching relationship, described as the pedagogy of supervision** (Grant, 2005; Nulty et al., 2009). Universities develop programs to support academic and research staff to supervise postgraduate candidates while also facilitating the learning of novice researchers and HDR candidates (Carton & Kelly, 2014; Carton et al., 2013; Luca et al., 2013). In this mixed methods research project questionnaires and interviews were used to determine what is valued by current and past HDR candidates of Avondale and which areas of our HDR programs need further development. This is the first of two papers that report the findings of this project.

**Introduction**

The reasons behind a potential student's choice of institution for their postgraduate studies may include issues relating to the institution's geographical location, reputation, academic staff and areas of expertise, as well available services and resources. However, at the centre of most students' choices of institution is the degree itself.

To ensure that the ongoing development of a research degree is informed by evaluation feedback from the candidates in the degree, data need to be gathered from current and graduated candidates. Such data have the potential to identify areas of

the degree that assist the progress of enrolled candidates as well as issues that may act as barriers to their progress. In the case of Avondale University, two research degrees are offered: the Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). The project outlined in this article aimed to investigate, firstly, why MPhil and PhD candidates choose Avondale to complete their research degrees and, secondly, to determine why these candidates stay at Avondale throughout their postgraduate studies. As well as researching information about what attracts HDR (higher degree research) candidates to Avondale, the findings of this project also revealed information about the aspects of Avondale, as an institution, that support or hinder MPhil and PhD candidates' progress. The methodology adopted in this study, outlined later in this article, ensures the voices of the MPhil and PhD candidates are heard and acted upon, within the context of course development at the institution.

By utilising research-informed data, it is anticipated that the outcomes of the study will inform the future development of the postgraduate research degrees at Avondale, including processes associated with course review and accreditation. The data reported in this article are used to supplement other evaluation data on file as part of Avondale's Quality Management System – that is, the review of relevant policies, gathering feedback from external advisory panels, benchmarking, evaluation surveys and both internal and external moderation procedures.

**Background literature**

The framework and expected factors surrounding student choice of institution to study higher degrees

“  
 By utilising research-informed data it is anticipated that the outcomes of the study will inform future development of post graduate research degrees  
 ”

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by research, and the factors that keep the candidate enrolled at that institution for the duration of their program, are the focus of this review.

Since the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Association (TEQSA) in 2011, it has become crucial to seek student input on their experiences of study at every level, including HDR candidates. Of particular interest has been to collect data on “outcomes and standards for learning and teaching” (Symons, 2012, p. 126). To this end the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) (Ainley, 2000; Graduate Careers Australia, n.d.), one of the tools used in this study, and the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) (Ginns et al., 2009), are two measures among others that were developed to seek evaluation data from HDR candidates and graduates.

Given the rigorous processes an HDR candidate encounters in their study program, and the other responsibilities they have while studying, the quality of the human support offered to HDR candidates and their relationships with such supports are typically paramount to the candidate. As suggested by Nulty et al. (2009), “co-supervisors, advisers, language and skills support staff, librarians, IT and other technical staff, and peers also contribute to the students’ development” (p. 693). They go on to explain that the main supervisor is the ‘focal point’ in bringing together and helping the candidate make sense of the many and various contributions the university departments have to offer.

In addition to the support provided by human resources to HDR candidates, there are certain waypoints or threshold concepts they need to reach and internalise in their studies (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). These include: understanding the required standard for a doctoral thesis, being able to critically appraise existing concepts in their discipline area, the ability to put together a coherent argument, the skill of developing a theoretical framework, and being able to position their methodology, results and conclusions within that *framework*. Working together, the supervisor assists the candidate to achieve these threshold concepts and, eventually, to reach the “completion state” of the degree. Given that Australian data shows that the national completion rates for PhDs is less than 50% after studying up to five years, and plateaus at approximately 70% after nine years, there is a mean national attrition rate of approximately 30% (Torka, 2020). Compared to this, Avondale has an HDR attrition rate of 25%.

Analysing the history of the relationship between universities and HDR candidates, Carayannopoulos (2012) explores the evolution in the last decade of candidates becoming the customers of universities. In order for universities to secure the enrolment of

HDR candidates in what is a competitive environment, they need to provide a product that is ‘user friendly’ and this starts with the relationship between the candidate and the supervisor. The importance of seeking candidate feedback to improve the program is highlighted:

If a student is to provide frank commentary on the quality of the supervision they receive, this may be identifiable and may place the student-supervisor relationship under greater strain or pressure, however if the comments of students are not addressed specifically with each supervisor or the survey instruments are not intentionally designed to obtain this feedback, can a university hope to improve the outcomes for both students and staff? (Carayannopoulos, 2012, p. 63)

While the relationship between candidate and supervisor is of prime importance to the experience of the candidate, there are other processes of socialisation that contribute to the candidate’s experiences. Gardner (2010) claims that the culture of the faculty contributes to the candidate’s socialisation. Another application of socialisation for the candidate is that of peer mentoring, and the way it develops. Gregoric and Wilson (2012) studied the informal process of two doctoral students and the way their relationship developed over time and followed the steps identified some time ago by Kram (1983) which are: no mentoring, initiation of mentoring, cultivation of mentoring, separation of mentoring, and redefinition of mentoring. According to Rose (2003), each of these stages revolves around relationship, integrity and guidance.

It is relevant to this background discussion to mention that Avondale’s quantitative survey of candidates used in the study reported in this paper, included 43% of items that related supervision and socialisation. The topics of these items, drawn from various research, included satisfaction with supervisory relationship (Carayannopoulos, 2012), socialisation with fellow candidates (Gregoric & Wilson, 2012), and relationship to other entities such as the Research Office, the library and the Information Technology Department (Nulty et al., 2009).

There are therefore multiple purposes for seeking input from HDR candidates regarding their experiences in their study programs. Firstly, there is the accountability required of institutions by TEQSA (Baird, 2010). Secondly, there is the commercial necessity of the university to attract and retain HDR candidates by seeking to discover their experiences and modify programs to cater for their needs. Finally, and very importantly for Avondale is the ethical desire and responsibility to provide the best experience for the candidates.

### Research methodology

This mixed methods research project was conducted specifically to inform the ongoing improvement and evaluation of Avondale’s Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. As part of Avondale’s commitment to quality assurance and enhancement, findings from this study have been used to inform the course review and accreditation processes that took place during 2020 for the MPhil and PhD degrees.

By gathering evaluation data from the main stakeholders (i.e., the candidates and graduates) involved in these two degrees, this participatory research project (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) ensures that the stakeholders’ perspectives are used to identify which successful aspects of the degrees Avondale should maintain and which problematic aspects of the degrees should be improved.

### Research setting and participants

The research setting of this research study was Avondale University and the participants of the study were drawn from the population of candidates who were currently enrolled or recently graduated from the institution’s HDR program. The participants were considered eligible to contribute to the study if they met the following inclusion criteria:

1. candidates who had been enrolled in the MPhil and PhD degrees during the six year period from 2014 to 2019; and
2. graduates who had completed either the MPhil or PhD degrees during the six year period from 2014 to 2019.

When this research began, the study’s population was made up of 24 graduated candidates and 45 current candidates (69 participants in all), all of which were invited to contribute to the study’s *Why Avondale Online Questionnaire*. From this population, 29 participants (42% of the total population) contributed responses to the online questionnaire and eight candidates participated in interviews (12% of the total population). Additionally, of the 15 HDR candidates who graduated from MPhil or PhD degrees from 2014 to 2019, eight of these (53% of total no. of graduates 2014-2019) responded to the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PREQ).

### Research Questions

Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from the study’s participants in order to gain answers to the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Why do HDR candidates, in MPhil or PhD degrees, choose Avondale to complete their postgraduate studies?

RQ2: What aspects of Avondale’s postgraduate learning experiences are valued or not valued, as reported by HDR candidates who are or were enrolled in MPhil or PhD degrees at Avondale?

### Data collection and analysis

In total, four types of data (including quantitative and qualitative) were gathered using the following data collection instruments.

**Enrolment data** were gathered from Avondale’s enrolment systems regarding the demographic information about current candidates and graduates of Avondale’s MPhil and PhD degrees (e.g., gender, age, enrolment dates).

**Questionnaire data (qualitative and quantitative)** from current candidates and graduates of Avondale’s MPhil and PhD degrees. The *Student Experience Survey – HDR* was modified to suit Avondale’s context and HDR program. This questionnaire became known as the *Why Avondale Online Questionnaire*. This questionnaire was administered online and requested participants to contribute information and views regarding the following issues:

- demographic data including age, geographic location, employment, languages spoken and gender;
- degree information including program type, enrolment dates, fee payment, mode of study and degree milestones achieved;
- reasons behind choice of Avondale as an institution for postgraduate study;
- valued or problematic aspects of their higher degree research (HDR) experience at Avondale;
- academic climate, skill development, expectations, impact, support and amenities; and
- suggested changes for future iterations of Avondale’s HDR program.

**Interview (qualitative) data** were gathered from a stratified purposive sample (Burns, 2000) of 15-20% the study’s total population of participants. This selection aimed to ensure that interviewees represented a variety of genders, degree programs, degree stages, ages, modes of study and ethnicities. Participants were asked to answer questions that focused on their reasons for selecting Avondale as a place of study, enablers and barriers to their study and recommendations for future modifications of Avondale’s HDR program. Sample questions from the interview scheduled included:

- Please describe why you selected Avondale as the institution where you enrolled in your higher research degree.

“very importantly for Avondale is the ethical desire and responsibility to provide the best experience for the candidates.”

“the stakeholders’ perspectives are used to identify which successful aspects of the degrees Avondale should maintain and which problematic aspects of the degrees should be improved.”

- When enrolling at Avondale in your HDR degree, did you have any reservations about completing your HDR here? If so, what were these reservations?
- When reflecting on your experience as an HDR candidate at Avondale, what aspects of your study did you particularly appreciate?
- When reflecting on your experience as an HDR candidate at Avondale, what were the main aspects of your study do you think could have been improved?
- If you could recommend some changes to how Avondale supports their HDR candidates, what changes would you suggest?

“When enrolling at Avondale in your HDR degree, did you have any reservations about completing your HDR here?”

**Questionnaire data (qualitative and quantitative)** from the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) from graduates of both the MPhil and PhD degrees, as part of the QILT (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching) survey program which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training.

The data gathered during this project were cleaned, collated and analysed, for the purposes of answering the study’s research questions, using the following data analysis methods:

- *Descriptive statistics* (including means, standard deviations and frequencies) were calculated from the quantitative questionnaire data gathered in this study.
- *A matrix analysis method* (Groenland, 2014; Patton, 2015) was used to code the qualitative data gathered in this study from questionnaires and interviews. The matrix analysis method was used with the intention to develop a grid that represents the various aspects of Avondale’s higher degree research programs

as one dimension on the grid (x axis) in relation to the participants’ comments (as evidenced in questionnaire, interview and QILT data) as the corresponding dimension (y axis). Both mapping and cognitive mapping) will be used (Miles & Huberman, 2013).

Data gathered from the interviews were audio recorded by the researchers and then de-identified before coding and analysis processes began.

**Findings**

Based on an analysis of data gathered from questionnaires, interviews and the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ), our results provided evidence to report on why HDR candidates (in MPhil or PhD degrees) chose Avondale to complete their postgraduate studies (answers to Research Question no. 1) and the aspects of their postgraduate learning experiences that they valued or did not value (answers to Research Question no. 2). Table 1 outlines how each source of data were used to inform answers to each of the study’s research questions.

**Reasons for choosing Avondale**

Analysis of the qualitative data provided by participants’ responses to the *Why Avondale Questionnaire*, along with their interview data, provided evidence about why recent graduates and current candidates chose Avondale as the institution to study their postgraduate degree. The qualitative data from the study were analysed using a matrix technique. The summarised results below have been extracted from the completed matrix.

When asked why they chose Avondale to study their HDR (Higher Degree Research) degree,

candidates in the MPhil or PhD courses provided a variety of responses, ranging from their perceptions of the institution as a whole through to expectations about how they expected to engage with their individual supervisors.

Many of the candidates commented on how they expected the degree to benefit their future employment and this reasoning was frequently linked to either Avondale’s special character or their employment at an institution which was seen to have a special character. The candidates noted that they were attracted to Avondale as an institution to complete their postgraduate studies due to the special Christian character of the institution: *Being a Christian institution as well, that was important and that their philosophy was very compatible with what Avondale stands for.*

**Aspects of Avondale that were valued**

The participants in the study reported on issues that assisted their progress during their studies as well as areas where they felt improvement was required. This information was drawn from the data gathered from the study’s questionnaires and interviews.

The participants’ responses to open-ended items in the *Why Avondale Questionnaire*, and their comments during the interviews revealed that the participants frequently mentioned their supervisors in a positive light, especially in relation to the way they disseminated advice and support: “Their comments and advice have been amazing”. They were typically described as “genuine”, “wonderful”, “knowledgeable” and “flexible”. The assistance provided by Library staff was also valued: “I have had really good assistance, extremely good assistance, from the library and ... these library guys are able to perform miracles and get hold of the document that you needed to help you”.

The candidates and graduates both appreciated the academic climate at Avondale in which their study was completed. This climate was described as “honest”, “supportive”, “encouraging”, “rigorous”, “open”, “professional and nurturing”. The institutional environment was perceived as particularly supportive to HDR candidates and their research, with some candidates mentioning how they valued the opportunity to study with like-minded people and the personalised educational experience offered by Avondale: “... there is a lot more potential there [at Avondale] for a personalised experience”. Many candidates valued opportunities they were given to develop resilience as well as their writing, thinking and analysis skills.

The participants’ responses to the *Why Avondale Questionnaire* provided further evidence about the aspects of Avondale’s postgraduate learning

experiences that were valued (see Table 2). The question that attracted the most agreement from the participants was “doing my research sharpened my analytical skills”. Out of all questions on the survey, this question also had the lowest standard deviation, meaning that there was the most agreement from participants with this statement. Other questions that were ‘strongly agreed’ with revolved around areas that were very impactful on the candidates’ actual academic programs. These included having multiple supervisors (4.6), developing and writing their ideas (4.52), using the library (4.45), and having appropriate places to work (4.36).

Table 2: *Aspects of Avondale that candidates/graduates valued most*

Overall most agreed with	Mean Score*	Standard Deviation
Doing my research sharpened my analytical skills	4.62	0.86
I benefitted from having more than one supervisor (if applicable)	4.6	1.03
I learned to develop my ideas and present them in written work	4.52	0.87
I used Avondale’s Library services	4.45	0.92
I had access to suitable working space when needed	4.36	1.10

\*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

“Being a Christian institution as well, that was important and that their philosophy was very compatible with what Avondale stands for.”

Table 1: *Source of data used to answer the study’s research questions*

RQ	Research Questions	Type of data used to answer the RQ		Data collection instrument used to answer the RQ
		Qualitative	Quantitative	
1	Reason for choosing Avondale	✓	-	Interviews
		✓	-	Questionnaires (open-ended questions)
2	Aspects of HDR course that were valued and not valued	-	✓	PREQs
		✓	-	Interviews
		-	✓	Questionnaires (closed questions, Likert-style items)
		✓	-	Questionnaires (open-ended questions)

**Aspects of Avondale that were not valued**

The qualitative data gathered throughout the study revealed some areas that past graduates and current candidates valued least about their postgraduate study experiences at Avondale. Problematic areas that were identified by the participants were primarily related to the institution’s administration systems. For example, many commented on the difficulties associated with navigating the policies and systems within the institution and the problems they encountered when enrolling in their courses, describing the experience as “very tricky”, “extremely frustrating” and “not streamlined”. The barriers they encountered when accessing reading material, resources and other support services were noted by some participants as memorable in their study



experiences. In terms of their dealings with their supervisors and other candidates, some participants found they encountered communication problems with their supervisors and wanted to experience more opportunities to connect with other candidates, noting that they enjoyed such experiences when they had the chance to engage in activities where candidates connected with each other, although they were rare.

The quantitative data further revealed areas of concern for candidates and graduates about their study experiences at Avondale. Table 3 outlines results from the *Why Avondale Questionnaire* that provided information about the aspects of Avondale's postgraduate learning experiences that were least valued by the participants of the study.

Table 3 illustrates that the statements the candidates least agreed with were things that were peripheral to their actual academic productivity and their work with their supervisors, but further did not score lower than 2.4 which might be interpreted as only slightly disagree. Importantly these items indicated experiences the farthest from optimal. It is interesting to note that on the questionnaire, the statement that had the widest range of scores from the candidates was the one referring to the impact a higher degree has had on the candidate's mental health (standard deviation of 1.40).

“higher (over 4) mean satisfaction levels were evident for three scales: Overall Satisfaction, Supervision, and Skill Development”

Table 3: Aspects of Avondale that candidates/graduates valued least

Overall least agreed with	Mean Score*	Standard Deviation
Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	2.41	1.03
Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my social life (transposed)	2.48	1.39
Avondale's counselling staff were helpful to my study (if applicable)	2.50	0.95
I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.60	1.12
Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my mental health (transposed)	2.67	1.40

\*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

These problematic areas provide specific direction into how the HDR program at Avondale, and the research training programs that support the HDR candidates, will be developed in the future.

Supplementary data gathered from the PREQ

To supplement the data gathered from questionnaires and interviews conducted during this project, data gathered from the administration of the *Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ)* between 2016 and 2019 were also analysed, especially for the purposes of answering Research Questions no. 2.

The *Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ)* is administered as part of the QILT (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching) survey program which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. This questionnaire “invites postgraduate research graduates four months after completing their degree to express agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale with statements about various aspects of their degree” (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2019, p. 23). Graduates are asked to respond to questions about supervision, intellectual climate, skills development, infrastructure, thesis examination and goals and expectations, as well as their overall satisfaction with their degree.

Of all of the candidates that graduated from Avondale's HDR program between 2016 and 2019, eight of these graduates responded to the PREQ. Between 2016 and 2019, Avondale had two candidates graduate from the MPhil program and 13 candidates graduate from the PhD program – a total of 15 HDR graduates in all. Therefore, the PREQ data represents responses from 53% (8 out of 15) of our graduates between 2016 and 2019.

The mean scores of the responses provided by Avondale's graduates indicated that higher (over 4) mean satisfaction levels were evident for three scales: Overall Satisfaction, Supervision, and Skill Development. Furthermore, the two scales that reported the lowest mean satisfaction levels were: “Intellectual Climate” and “Industry Engagement Scale”. Table 4 provides the means of each scale within the PREQ, based on four years of data from 2016 to 2019.

While the PREQ data from 2016 through to 2019 do not provide any specific insights into the reasons why HDR candidates in the MPhil and PhD courses choose Avondale to complete their postgraduate studies, these data provide an indication of the aspects of Avondale's postgraduate learning experiences that are valued or not valued (i.e., answers to Research Question no. 2).

As such, these PREQ data suggest that, while Avondale HDR graduates are satisfied with their

overall experience at Avondale, further work is required to develop a research culture that is characterised by an intellectual climate and strategies are required to assist candidates to see the relevance and make links between their postgraduate studies and their career “industries”.

Summary of findings

To answer the first research question, the main reasons identified by candidates as to why they selected Avondale as the institution to complete their postgraduate studies, had to do with the nature of the institution. The main reason revolved around the Christian special character and worldview of the institution, including the special character employment options that became available to them through their connections with Avondale. Secondary to this was the personal attention they believed they would receive in a smaller institution and the nature of the HDR course.

The second research question sought to identify the main aspects of the HDR program that were appreciated by HDR candidates. These reasons included a combination of support from Avondale personnel, access to academic resources, and opportunities for personal and professional development. Specifically highlighted were: the work of their supervisors; the academic climate; assistance from Library staff; availability of working space; flexibility of the program; and opportunity to develop skills.

The main areas HDR candidates expressed concern about were mostly peripheral to the

Table 4: Means of scales from Avondale's PREQ results: 2016-2019

Scale	Mean (1-5) (Avondale, 2016-2019)
Overall Satisfaction	4.0
Supervision	4.04
Intellectual Climate	3.13
Skill Development*	4.20
Infrastructure	3.68
Thesis Examination	3.67
Goals and Expectations	3.96
Industry Engagement Scale**	3.22

\*Some participants did not respond to all items in the SD scale.

\*\*The IE scale was introduced in 2019 and, as such, was only completed by the 3 graduates from 2019.

academic program. Administrative concerns were at the top of the list, including: the enrolment process which was seen as unnecessarily complex; access to some services and resources; and understanding Avondale's systems and policies. Other concerns were associated with communication, lack of induction and making connections with other HDR candidates.

Findings from the PREQ data indicated that, overall, candidates were most content with their supervision, their skill development, and their overall satisfaction. This triangulates with the data gleaned from the *Why Avondale Online Questionnaire* which also highlights the positive aspects of the candidates' supervision experience and the strong development of individual skills that HDR candidates have experienced. The one anomaly presented by the two sets of survey data is that the initial survey highlighted Avondale's academic environment as a strength but Avondale's intellectual climate was rated as being quite low in the PREQ data. It would be interesting to find out why candidates see academic environment and intellectual environment differently.

Discussion and recommendations

As predicted, many aspects raised by current candidates and past graduates of Avondale's HDR program were related to how they interacted with their supervisors, support staff and librarians, as was highlighted through Nulty et al.'s work (2009). The candidates' comments reflected issues outlined under the TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Association) standards for Standard 4.1 Research and Standard and 4.2 Research Training (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2011).

Aspects of previous research published about the pedagogy of supervision (Bruce et al., 2009; Grant, 2005; Green & Lee, 1999; Qureshi & Vazir, 2016; Sinclair, 2004) were also evident in the findings of this study. For example, our participants commented frequently on the interaction with their supervisors and how such interaction taught them about research. One area from the pedagogy of supervision research that was somewhat absent from the data we gathered was evidence that the HDR candidates thought of themselves as researchers. Their comments were more focused on the product of their research (publications, presentations, theses), rather than their own development as a researcher.

HDR candidates often complain about the isolation they feel as a postgraduate researcher (Gregoric & Wilson, 2012; Keefer, 2015) and this was also a concern of Avondale's HDR candidates. HDR candidates at other institutions have reported the need for “increased candidate support and socialization opportunities” (Rigler Jr, et al., 2007, p. 2)

“aspects ... appreciated ... included ... support from Avondale personnel, access to academic resources, and opportunities for personal and professional development.”

while researchers have highlighted the “advantages of community approaches to learning” (Parker, 2009, p. 44) in HDR education. So too, Avondale’s candidates expressed interest in engaging in more social and networking activities that enabled them to meet up with other candidates. Because our HDR cohort are primarily studying from a distance and are not able to easily visit either of our physical campuses, much of the peer interaction sought by our candidates needs to be, and has become, facilitated using online technologies, as suggested by a number of researchers in recent years (Guerin, et al., 2018; Sapouna et al., 2020).

The findings of this study indicated that the overall nature of the institution was important for applicants considering Avondale as a place of study as well as candidates who were progressing through their degree. While this has not been a strong theme in past studies about HDR candidates’ experiences, it appears to be a deciding factor in, firstly, attracting research candidates to Avondale and, secondly, keeping them enrolled throughout their degree. While some of aspects of our findings reinforce or overlap with previous literature on the professional learning needs of HDR candidates and reasons for attrition (Gardner, 2009; Rigler Jr et al., 2017), our research has revealed a slightly new field of interest from

HDR candidates – their appreciation for the special character institution. Interestingly, the participants’ comments gathered during this study reflected their awareness of the institution’s special character before they applied to study, during their studies and the predicted potential of the institution to provide future employment opportunities was also mentioned.

**Recommendations**

In consideration of the results of the study, we have identified a number of modifications that are required to improve the MPhil and PhD programs and the Research Training Program that supports the candidates throughout these HDR programs at Avondale. Being guided by the recommendations of Carayannopoulos (2012), we have used this data to improve the way in which our institution and our supervisors interact with HDR candidates. Table 5 provides an account of the types of research-informed recommendations that have been or are being implemented, based on the current and past HDR candidates’ and graduates’ recommendations.

**Limitations of current study and suggestions for future research**

This study only sought data from candidates in the research degrees at Avondale – that is, the MPhil and

PhD degrees within a limited time frame. Views from the candidates’ supervisors were not gathered during this study. Future researchers may wish to include supervisors, as well as candidates and graduates, to expand the views represented regarding their institution’s HDR programs. This study could also be re-worked to find out more about how supervisory panels operate including investigations into the interaction between supervisors, sharing of expertise, their various roles and contributions.

While this study did include differences in responses between candidates and graduates, as well as between males and females (to be explored in the next paper), there are many more contributing factors that could be investigated including: previous degrees, demographic profiles, and work experience. Each of these factors are not only areas for future possible research, but were likely to have been limitations that contributed to the nature of the data collected.

There are several other possible directions this study could follow. One possibility would be to replicate this study over an extended period to collect longitudinal data for the purpose of investigating trends and responses to change. Another avenue to increase the size of the data sample would be to invite other universities to participate, thereby allowing benchmarking of results and collaborative improvement.

Being a special character institution, more data could be collected that applies to that niche role and having other Christian tertiary institutions collect similar data would be worthwhile.

Although this bespoke project design has been constructed for the specific purposes of conducting this research project at Avondale as part of the data collection processes required to complete the course review and accreditation processes for the MPhil and PhD degrees, this research design may be replicated by other higher education institutions to evaluate their own postgraduate programs.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to address a gap in researcher education: to source the voices of an institution’s current and recent HDR candidates and graduates, and to use these voices to inform future development of both the institution’s HDR program and the research training program that supports supervisors and candidates in the HDR program. While some evaluation data have been gathered intermittently within the institution about its HDR program, a consolidated and systematic evaluation program was needed. Such a program has now been established to inform the program’s future improvement and development.

Much has been said and written about doctoral and researcher education by researchers, supervisors and professional learning educators but the voice of the candidate has not always been central to such conversations. While only reporting evaluation data from one institution’s HDR candidates and graduates, this article offers a systematic approach to analysing an institution’s HDR program over a stretch of six years (2014-2019), incorporating multiple sources of internally and externally collected data.

This research found that HDR candidates at Avondale appreciated, above all, the special nature of the institution and the quality of the supervision they received. While they had suggestions for how some of the institution’s administration processes and research training could be improved, the participants consistently expressed appreciation for the human element of support at the institution which was made available to HDR candidates on a consistent basis.

This paper is the first of a series of two articles that report on the results of a study, conducted at Avondale University. This research evaluated the institution’s HDR program by gathering feedback from the HDR candidates themselves. This article has reported on the aspects of Avondale’s HDR program that its candidates valued and, on the other hand, found wanting. The next paper in this series will report on the differences between the way the current candidates and graduates reported on their postgraduate experiences, and the differences between the way males and females reported on their postgraduate learning experiences. **TEACH**

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“our research has revealed a slightly new field of interest from HDR candidates – their appreciation for the special character institution”

“This study could also be re-worked to find out more about how supervisory panels operate ... the interaction between supervisors, sharing of expertise, their various roles and contributions.”

Table 5: Practical recommendations being implemented

Topic of recommendation	Recommendation	Progress
Enrolment system	Needs to be more streamlined with obvious advice regarding required actions of applicants.	Planned
Orientation program	Orientation programs for new candidates and re-orientation programs for returning candidates have been introduced for on-campus and distance candidates at the beginning of each semester.	Achieved
Research Training Program	More candidate-candidate interaction	In-progress
	Offer mainly online	Achieved
Clarity of milestones	Review of HDR-policies and Research Training Support Framework	In-progress
Distance candidates	More specifically-tailored services and support for candidates studying at a distance	In-progress
Feedback mechanisms	Develop opportunities for supervisors and candidates to offer ongoing feedback about the HDR program and Research Training Program	Planned
Finance	More transparency required about amounts, due dates and invoices	Planned
Mental health support	Increase visibility of and communication about mental health services	In-progress
Research culture	More engagement between HDR candidates and other researchers	In-progress

# The attrition from Christian faith of our graduates while at university: Why does it happen, and what can be done about it?

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**Keywords:** Attrition, apologetics, mentoring, lived community

## Abstract

**Academic literature, supported by empirical evidence indicates there is a huge drop out from Christian faith amongst those who begin university ostensibly as Christians. While this may be seen as a manifestation of the Parable of the Sower, it nonetheless represents an existential problem for the broader church in so far as much potential future membership and leadership within Christian circles has evaporated within a few short years. Questions arise as to whether the Christian community is sufficiently alert to the issue and is attempting possible mitigation strategies. Approaches to stemming the tide include avoiding cocooning young people in a Christian bubble without the skills to navigate the intellectual and ethical challenges of campus life, the importance of developing a strong Christian worldview underlaid by effective apologetics, the need for focussed mentoring supported by strong biblical teaching, and the critical nature of experiencing lived Christian community. Without such approaches, the church at large will probably continue to experience the corrosive impact of very extensive fall out from faith of young people in their late teens and early 20s.**

## 1. Analysis of the problem

Over recent decades, there has been extensive attention given in schools, and in the academic literature, to transitions: from pre-school to kindergarten, from primary to high school. What has not been so commonly discussed in schools, in university education faculties and certainly not in churches, is the transition from high school to

university of those who have been identified, by themselves, their schools or their churches, as Christian. This issue has gained little traction in schools, which are inclined to regard the future progress of their graduates as outside their concern. They do, after all, have rather enough demands on their time and energy, as new cohorts move up a stage within schools. There is, however, a case to be made that preparation of these young people for a sustainable transition, in which their Christian faith will not only survive but flourish, is part of the shepherding remit of the school, and of fundamental concern to churches, which, without worthwhile interventions, all too often see the departure of their youth, their future adult lifeblood, not only from their churches but from the practice of faith entirely.

Various sources put the fall-out rate of those who are ostensibly Christian on beginning university at between 70 and 75 per cent. American research cites similarly large figures in 'an epidemic of young people leaving the evangelical church' (Powell & Clark, 2011, pp. 15-16). This is a fearsome statistic, and one which should concern deeply those of us in Christian schools if we are to care longitudinally for the young people we have disciplined. It represents a comprehensive collapse, indeed evisceration, of much of our work. It is, in Christian terms, an aspect of the aphorism of getting all A's but failing life. NCLS (National Church Life Survey) research shows that a third of Christian school leavers will have departed from faith by the age of 19, probably within one year of leaving school (Sing, p. 16).

The last stages of adolescence, typically the university years, are a key time of making life decisions before pathways become locked in by prior choices (Garber, 2007, pp. 94-125). This echoes the precept of the writer of Ecclesiastes: Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.

(Eccles 12:1, NIV)

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One commentator has remarked that at the end of their school years, some students hang their faith, like a now unwanted garment, on a hook at the door as they leave the building for the last time (Cooling, 1997). They do not move successfully through the stages of affiliation and searching faith to an owned faith (Maple, 1997, p. 92 citing Westerhoff). Powell and Clark (2011), in an American context, agree (pp. 62, 74, 91). For some, faith has not existed outside of their practice of it at school (Maple, 1997, p. 100). What are the possible dynamics of this apparent widespread collapse of faith post-school?

## 2. Causes of the problem

Many Christian analyses of secular universities in a post-Christian age, written largely from the 'inside', raise issues of concern about the intellectual and cultural climate for Christian young people at university. Budziszewski (2004, p. 17) asserts that as soon as tertiary students arrive on campus, their Christian convictions are under attack. They are alone (p. 22), at the same time as having to assume adult responsibility (p. 24). They experience a form of culture shock, often, as a coping strategy, adopting the norms of those around them (p. 27). Any Christian beliefs they have are patronised by academic staff (p. 52). Sometimes the opposition is more militant, as in the case of academics like Rorty who were determined to undermine the Christian faith of students and reshape them (Edlin, 2014, p.19). At its very best, faith will have been pushed to the margins of academic study (Benne, 2001, p. 5) while a nihilistic purposelessness reigns supreme (Garber, 2007, p. 73), overtaken by training to make money in large quantities (p. 94). This produces a sense of alienation and a crisis of identity (p. 98). There is a lack of meaning or coherence (p. 90); a technical competence (p. 89) belies a lack of commitment and purpose (p. 91). It is what MacIntyre (cited in Garber, 2007) has identified as the loss of a credible telos (p. 157). Despite its emptiness, it can be absorbed by the power of material allure, perhaps by osmosis.

Elements of this loss of meaning can be found in what Taylor (2007, p. 473) describes as 'expressive individualism' or pathological self-orientation. Trueman (2020) describes this as "the expressive individualism of psychological man" (p.325). Taylor sees it as a form of emergent egomania (p. 552), allied to and partially driven by the consumerist revolution and pursuit of (ephemeral) happiness (p. 474) which leads to superficial and unsatisfactory "channel surfing through life" (p. 480). To J. K. Smith (2016), these are false orientations, "pedagogies of desire" (pp. 21-22) which habituate

in unhelpful ways forming "liturgies of desire" (Smith, 2009, pp. 25-54) which shape identities and determine concepts of 'the good life' and establish dispositions (Smith, 2009, p. 71). Individuals define themselves according to the narrative in which they see themselves (Smith, 2014, p. 25).

Garber (2007) asserts that in a university culture of relativism, where deconstruction leads to an avant-garde incoherence (p. 63), there is a determined effort to evacuate all moral precepts (p. 68), so that there are no compelling values (p. 71) and, perversely, whoever ends life with the most 'toys' is the victor (p. 5). If we wonder why those familiar with faith would abandon it for emptiness, the answer may be that it is packaged alluringly, with its own intellectual sub-structure. Some approach this by adopting multiple identities, assuming whatever fits the context – whether faith based for some and devoid of faith for others, without acknowledging the tension or disintegration implied (Powell & Clark, 2011, pp. 50-51, 54). They lock their faith and its ethical implications away in an 'identity box' (pp. 54-55, citing Clydesdale), to be opened only on occasions when it is not in the way. This of course can be the preliminary to the loss of faith entirely.

Menzies (2019) has, with this the moral torpor, identified a new Western secular 'fundamentalism' based on the implicit adoption of market liberalism, freedom of choice (without constraints) and the right to continuous sexual enjoyment (p. 5). If there is any truth, it is only accessible through science (p. 16), all of which will lead to a utopia (p. 23). This is not unrelated to what Parker (2017) identifies as the salvific claims of the happiness movement (p. 116).

Corney (2009) would see this failure to maintain faith commitment as part of a general social malaise. Factors such as extensive family dysfunction and breakdown, and the possibility of being 'cancelled' by friends for taking a strong stance on beliefs and behaviour, both contribute to a fragility, fear of rejection and abandonment and insecurity, which renders firm and lasting commitments less likely.

To this, he adds the impact of an increasingly consumerist society, where there are so many options, committing long-term (to anything) is less likely than keeping options open for the emergence of better possibilities. Even where there appears to be commitment, Corney explains that this can mask the existence of a double life, as young people operate in different registers in different environments – one at church and in Christian circles, and an altogether different and antithetical one elsewhere – without acknowledging the tension between these modes.

If this is the milieu which many apparently Christian young people enter and in which they flounder, how may we interpret this theologically? The Parable of the Soils (more commonly known as the Parable of the Sower - Luke 8:1-15, Matthew 13:1-23) provides a structure within which an interpretation of a failure of faith to germinate to maturity can be formed. Some fall at the hurdle of opposition or strife (Luke 8:13), such as the emaciation of a Christian hope and ethos, as described above. Some are drawn away by life's vicissitudes or pleasures (Luke 8:14). Graduates fellowship staff worker Rowan Kemp (personal communication - email 9th February, 2021) identifies amongst the latter: the strong lure of money, possessions, popularity, sex, luxury, pleasure, materialism and power - as patent lures away from a life of faith, while a focus on building a career and worldly success can be equally crushing of the primacy of faith. Garber (2007, p. 93) refers to a university survey which indicated that overwhelmingly what students wanted was vacation homes, expensive foreign cars, yachts and private jets. The 'hook up' culture of alcohol laden, emotional commitment free casual sex is very powerful and widespread on campus (Powell & Clark, 2011, p. 17). Trueman (2020) writes of the normalisation through the sexual revolution of (almost anything) (p. 21). He describes it as 'the triumph of the erotic' (p. 301). The party scene which gives it context is an antidote to loneliness and a searching for friends, and a desire to enjoy the 'good life' free from restraints (Powell & Clark, 2011, pp. 18, 55). However, some recent research (Vashishtha, Pennay, Dietze, & Livingston, 2021) suggests a trend for youth becoming more risk averse in some areas.

Opposition to faith, Kemp mentions, is likely to associate itself with the alleged misogyny and homophobia of the Church, as well as the disclosed outrages (mostly, recently, sexual abuse) perpetrated by some of its official representatives. All of this can be corrosive of faith, particular in the face of intellectual assaults on Christianity by lecturers and tutors. Wolterstorff (2019) writes of the common view amongst academics that belief in God indicated a 'rationality deficit' in students (p. 63), citing Weber, 100 years before, insisting that faith has no place in a university (p. 9). Taylor (2007) refers to Weber's view that to maintain faith in the Academy is a form of intellectual suicide (p. 550). These views, strongly put by academics, can leech away faith.

At this point, consideration turns to whether the Christian community has in any way aided and abetted their departure from faith, whether

gradually (Garber, 2007, p. 47) or in precipitate collapse. Much of the literature suggests that, sadly, the answer is yes. Poplin (2014, p. 37) argues that Christian theologians pioneered the process of secularising Christianity, maintaining the husk but stripping out the key contents. Maple (1997, p. 95) argues that the low view of the importance of ministry to youth in churches has left them without satisfactory preparation for an adulthood embracing of faith. It represents a lack of vision (p. 1). They are not equipped to critically evaluate culture, but often instead are offered a denial of and refuge from that culture (p. 30). Benne (2001) claims that too often those transitioning to adulthood have been left with a Sunday School understanding of faith that is not compatible with or sustainable through tertiary learning, and so are encouraged into a dualistic theology where they cannot connect their faith with the world beyond the church. Moreover, this 'two spheres' model of disintegration has often been positively encouraged in churches (Benne, 2001, p. 76, Holmes, 2001, p. 115), in contradistinction to the famous epithet of Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper which states "There is not a square inch on the whole plain of human existence over which Christ, who is Lord over all, does not proclaim 'This is mine!' " (cited in Benne, 2001, p. 70).

The withdrawal from the world into piety has also failed to prepare young university students for the very real challenges of life in the actual world (Newbigin, 1989, p. 113) as it strips intellectual content from faith and so renders faith irrelevant to academic pursuits (Benne, 2001, pp. 36-37). Indeed, Dreher (2017) argues for a kind of monastic withdrawal from the current post-Christian society into a counter-culture (p. 16). This did not seem to be Jesus' intention (John 17:15-18). This has played into what Noll (1994) has called 'The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind'; the scandal, put simply, is that evangelicals have ceded the world of thought to the secularists, giving way to a religious programmatic utilitarianism (p. 12), leading non- or anti- Christians to dominate the intellectual life of those starting out in university life as apparent Christians (p. 17). Blamires (2005), puts it even more starkly the Christian mind does not exist (p. 4). In contravention of this view, Smith (2009), argues that Christian faith is too Cartesian, concentrating on the cognitive to the virtual exclusion of the affective (p. 127).

In reflection on youth ministry, Roberts (2021) quotes T. C. Hammond, writing as long ago as 1940, claiming that part of the malaise visible even then was that the fundamentals of Christian faith were not well enough taught, nor was the Bible well

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enough expositied.

Michael Williamson (cited in Sing, 2021, p. 16), outgoing Director of Anglican Youthworks' Gap Year Program Year 13 represents the program as an attempt to fill a gap in the transition of church-ed young people into adult responsibility in a variety of areas, including education, tutelage without which many will become 'pigmy' Christians.

### 3. Possible interventions

It would be easy to see this level of attrition as simply an outworking of the Parable of the Sower (which no doubt it is) and hence resign ourselves to the loss of so many who appear to begin well, only to fall from faith. That the Lord will preserve his own, can be asserted (John 10:28-29) for he is Sovereign. However, Christian educators are responsible for effective ministry, as sub-shepherds of the Lord. What then can be done?

#### Models and Mentors

Phillip Jensen, former Chaplain at UNSW and who has devoted so much of his ministry life to this age and developmental stage, reflected (interview March 2020) from his extensive experience on this dilemma: observing that those in Christian circles would usually not persevere with faith unless they had two, or preferably three, pillars of support. These he identified as *Christian family, church* or church youth group and *para-church organisation*, for instance a Christian group on campus. The best approach therefore is to engage maximum immersion in multiple sources of faith enculturation and sustaining interaction. His views are consistent with Garber (2007, p. 51), who maintains that what is necessary is a combination of conviction (a robust Christian worldview adequate for the challenges of post-modernism, pluralism and secularism), character (as modelled by a Christian who embodies faith authentically) and community (a support structure of other Christians seeking to live integrated lives of integrity). To Garber, intentionality (p. 49), conceptually rather like Smith's desires of the heart, and a peer group of other Christian people on a similar journey (p. 163) are significant supports. Smith (2016, p. 155) sees this in terms of formation, where it is vital to habituate Christian people into the 'liturgies' and practices of faith, in a manner which becomes self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating, and which sparks the imagination. This is a form of apprenticeship training in a Christian telos, a formation in virtue (Smith, 2016, p. 159). To Dow (2013, passim<sup>1</sup>) it can be expressed in the development of a virtuous

<sup>1</sup>Latin term for "scattered".

Christian mind, with aspects of intellectual courage, tenacity, curiosity, honesty and humility, amongst others. To Maple (1997, p. 99), a mature Christian mentor who can assist in engaging a Christian mind with faith challenges is very important. Garber (2007, p. 21) agrees, seeing mentors as a chief means towards the interpretation and understanding of Christian beliefs. They can interpret 'the good life', such a powerful aspiration in current Western society, in Christian terms (pp. 142-143). This is consistent with Cooling (1997), who maintains that unless there are those who can assist robust exploration of Christian responses to difficult questions (for instance, the compatibility of a good God with the ubiquity of pain and suffering), the likely consequences are either a cessation of faith or a containment of it within the ideological enclosure of fundamentalism in which it ceases to relate to the real world. This is reiterated by Holmes (2001, p. 117). Benne (2001, p. 106) argues for a four-pronged approach including: the attitudinal (a positive motivation towards Christian thinking), the ethical (a Christian moral framework), the foundational (which challenges the assumptions of fields of learning) and identified worldviews. This quadrilateral approach can essentially be reduced to the importance of preserving Christian morality and a Christian worldview if one is to persist in truth. Budziszewski (2004) insists on the formative importance of a deep study of the Bible and accountability to others within a faith community, and a spiritual mentor as well as an intellectual support circle (p. 158). Important also are resisting the demands of the flesh (pp. 77, 165; 2 Peter 2:19) otherwise, as Smith (2009, 2016) argues, 'desires of the heart' will shape life affinities and beliefs. Part of this proactivity is the maintenance of the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, worship and living life in the presence of God (Budziszewski, p. 28) and frequent fellowship with believers, "otherwise if you go into the world alone, you'll be swallowed" (p. 29). In the world, one needs to adopt the whole armour of God (p. 98; Ephesians 6:10-18). To McGrath (2019), it is important to live out a better story than the secular narrative (p. 16), one capable of capturing the imagination (p. 98), a better narrative, a paradigm which offers 'meaning, significance and fullness' (p. 99). Smith (2016, p.10) paraphrases Augustine: as our hearts are made for God, we will remain restless with the substitutes.

#### Mentoring modalities – in church and family

In terms of praxis, the voices of those on the 'inside' are important. Former St. Andrew's Cathedral School Captain and subsequent Sydney University Evangelical Union faculty leader Anthony Segart

noted (personal communication - email 12th March, 2021) that university experience is for most a time of shifting community and reappraisal of previous thinking, in which the attraction of riches and pleasures is both constant and alluring. To cope with this in Christian terms, he argues for formal mentoring and, in a framework where the real issues are on the planes of contentment and emotion, clear exposition of the beauty and wonder of the gospel, with opposition and counter lifestyle to be met not with retreat into a Christian bubble, but with a deep immersion in the Word of God. Powell and Clark (2011) agree that 'sticky faith' (that which sticks or lasts) involves both Christian practices and inner thoughts; it is personal and communal (p. 22), it gives faith primacy (p. 23).

#### Mentoring modalities – in schools and youth groups

Sing (2021), in interviewing the incoming Director of Anglican Youthworks Year 13 Program, Stephen Shearsby, reports his view that the time to invest in young people is while they are still at school, before 'Schoolies' week, when many, without sufficient support structure, may abandon faith in the dissolution of this week, when restraint can be thrown to the winds. They need to be ushered into networks and have already had visits at school from Christian campus workers who can shepherd them into study and fellowship groups upon their arrival at university (p. 17). One example of attempting to bridge this school to university gap is Phillip Jensen's (n.d.) Launch Camp, convened immediately before university orientation week.

Richard Edlin asserts (personal communication email March 1, 2021), it is critical for Christian schools to engage in training that will equip their staff to integrate Christian world view thinking into their teaching in a manner which assists their students to recognise and critique the assumptions of secular humanism. He argues that schools need to equip teachers, and therefore students to operate "from a deliberate, biblical worldview that is all-embracing, imaginative, dynamic, uncompromising yet epistemologically humble, and hope-filled in the current spiritually-bewildered post modern society." Such an approach will assist in case-hardening secondary students for the assaults, intellectual and ethical, they will experience at university. Failure to do this he describes as 'pre-emptive capitulation' to the dominance of the secular humanist narrative.

Christian educators also need to consider that the situation may not be what it seems on the surface. Sociologist Christian Smith has pioneered and popularised the notion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD – Smith & Denton, 2005 – see an extended discussion in Powell, Mulder

& Griffin, 2016, pp.130-135), contending that the real religion of many who may be assumed to be Christian, and are even involved in Christian practice (Church membership, Christian meeting attendance) is in fact sub-Christian. Their defacto religion, he suggests, is an amalgam of three essential propositions: good people go to Heaven (without repentance or Jesus); the role of God is to make us happy, which is the essential purpose of life, and to help us out when we experience a problem; God is essentially an uninvolved deity who makes no demands (Smith & Denton, 2005, pp. 48-49). They describe this concept of God as a combination of 'Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist' (p. 50) and claim that MTD has "colonised many established religious traditions and congregations" (as) "a parasitic faith" (p. 57). It "feeds upon and shapes – one might say infects" (p. 55) the host faith. This is consistent with the finding by Bellah in 1967 (cited in Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 55) that religious faith was often 'eclectic, idiosyncratic, and syncretistic' (p. 55). This may be a cause, or otherwise a symptom, of mission drift in some Churches, and/or a sign that the Bible has not been expositied faithfully or clearly by them, or related to life beyond a Christian sub-culture. Indeed, in terms of the young, Budziszewski (2004, p. 35) claims that as they mature, the content of Christian training often depletes. Without proper Christian formation, the allure of sin can lead to an evacuation of faith (p. 77). Powell and Clark (2011), citing Willard, argue along with Smith that many apparent Christian young people have not in fact grasped the gospel and instead apply themselves to a form of satisfactory (in their terms) morality which aims at 'sin management' (p. 34). It is a form of performance-based (sub-) Christianity (p. 36). Garber (2007) remarks tellingly that once primary culture defaults to the paradigms of the therapist, good and evil are recast as appropriate and inappropriate while right and wrong lose their absolute status and become a matter of relative judgment (p. 130), thereby eroding the absolute claims of Christian ethics and beliefs.

Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES), the umbrella group of Christian organisations on campus across Australian Universities, have in an email (personal communication, March 4, 2021), assessed multiple causes of the apparent collapse of faith across the years of university attendance. They indicate the failure of some to transition from a derivative faith owned by their parents to an adult faith of their own. Sometimes this is associated with a failure to grow beyond an elementary understanding of faith at the very time when their university and

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it is important  
to live out a  
better story  
than the  
secular  
narrative, one  
capable of  
capturing the  
imagination,  
... a  
paradigm  
which offers  
meaning,  
significance  
and fullness

”

“  
[a] concept  
of God as a  
combination  
of Divine  
Butler and  
Cosmic  
therapist ...  
has colonised  
many  
established  
religious  
traditions and  
congregations (as) a  
parasitic faith

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hence secular studies are growing in complexity and sophistication. Each have left the world where the thought problems of Jerusalem and Athens contended together (Judge, 2014, *passim*) and entered the world of Babylon (Williams, 2020), where faith is in exile, surrounded by an alien environment. Such casualties from faith adherence in fact have had no plan, and no mechanism, for growing as Christians. Some have been taught an anaemic version of faith, which is otherworldly, lack any tutoring in Christian apologetics to equip them to deal with the level of opposition they will face to the credibility of faith in the tertiary sphere, lack a strong community that will give plausibility to faith, and wilt when they are challenged to apply faith in terms of self-sacrifice, mission and evangelism. They have not understood the need to ‘take up their cross’ (Luke 9:23). Some have never been more than loosely affiliated in a nominal adherence, which quickly melts away. Some have been attracted to the relational and even entertainment aspects of Christian youth groups, but are not ready for or committed to real engagement with Christian beliefs and ethics. Some cannot equate a binary but aberrant view they import, that all Christians are good and nice and all non-Christians are the opposite, with the reality of a larger and more diverse pool of people at university. In these comments, AFES staff identified the inadequacies of Church teaching and preparation of young people, and the unhelpful Christian ‘bubble’ experience of some schools, which cocoons students within an unexamined Christian culture and, which failed to prepare students for an often adversarial view of faith at university level, where a fragile faith is quickly shattered, particularly in an environment where, if they do not conform to peer group norms, they can be ‘defriended’ or ‘cancelled’.

All of these observations can of course be understood through the prism of the Parable of the Sower and are contemporary manifestations of it. At this point, we need to decide whether we give a collective theological shrug, and say that those who have fallen away were obviously not of the elect, or whether we attempt to stem the tide. Yes, the Lord is Sovereign, but are we not also responsible to endeavour to, if not stop the torrent, at least slow it?

### Conclusion

The departure from faith of such significant numbers of apparently Christian persons during their university years represents a major challenge for the Christian Church. National Christian Life Survey (NCLS) data shows that congregations across the nation are aging, in the sense that their

average age considerably exceeds the norm of the population at large. If renewal and replenishment is to come, the most likely source would appear to be through the young, who are underrepresented in churches. Consequently, the fall-out from faith of so many, indeed most, well-educated youth who might be expected to not only populate churches, but provide various forms of leadership, represents a major blow, and an existential dilemma. While this may be seen as the Parable of the Sower in action, the situation does raise questions as to what may be done to at least partially stem the tide of attrition.

The challenges to faith at tertiary level are considerable. Garber (2007) refers to the belittlement of beliefs and faith as non-cognitive (p. 60) and subjective (p. 67), part of the radical privatisation of faith as mere feeling. He notes the loss of Christian idealism when confronted with the harsh realities of the world, resulting in a loss of hope and faith paralysis (p. 32), further the polarisation of ‘facts’ away from faith and values (p. 107), leading to a disintegration of life and beliefs. Smith (2009) notes the habituation of the previously Christian into desires and loves which are antithetical, and hence undermining, of truth.

The literature suggests a range of measures which may, under God, assist in limiting the toll of attrition. Amongst these are clear and robust teaching and application to life of the Bible in churches, youth groups and Christian schools. Such teaching needs to provide a corrective to an apparent cultural drift into a reductionist Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. It needs to equip students transitioning from school to university with a comprehensive grasp of Christian faith. Necessary is the development of a strong Christian worldview. Garber’s (2007) research and experience indicated that always, when faith survives and flourishes into adulthood, a student has been: assisted by a mentor who embodies and lives a Christian worldview (pp. 143-144) and supported by a community who lived out that worldview (p. 124). Part of the development of that Christian worldview will involve education in Christian apologetics, for one’s own sake and those one can influence (instead of having faith undermined by being unable to find any answers to their contentions). As the Apostle Peter has urged “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV).

To Smith (2009) the affective aspects are more important, but consistent with, the cognitive. For faith to flourish, young people need to be habituated into its practices, and find their loves and their hearts’ desires within it. Without this occurring,

they will be habituated into other desires and loves which lead them away from faith.

People who sustain faith over a lifetime are those, says Garber (2007) who can navigate their way through the problems posed by existence, as they have “woven together beliefs and behaviour into a fabric of faithfulness” (p. 18). They have combined a worldview, a mentor and a community into “habits of heart” (p. 21). They have transitioned into adulthood without compromising their Christian integrity or being seduced by money and lifestyle (p. 33). They have a coherent faith and a worldview which addresses all of life (p. 138). They will have avoided nihilism, and a cancerous individualism and have a counter-identity to the dominant culture (p. 159).

Unless Christian schools, churches and Christian young people themselves actively strategise for the preservation of faith, through growth in learning and understanding of their faith and the worldview on which it is postulated, through mentoring and Christian community and through applying their hearts to the captivating riches of the gospel, the attrition rate from faith will probably continue, perhaps even worsen. **TEACH**

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When authoring this work **Dr John Collier** was Head of St. Andrew’s Cathedral School, Sydney and Head of St. Andrew’s Gawura (Indigenous) School, a position he held for 12 years before initiating the succession planning that resulted in appointment of the first female Head of School Dr McGonigle.

In 2022 he will transition to new roles as Dean of Education at Morling College including a passion to research the best possible model of Christian education. John shares this work was written as part of his immersion in the Pacific Hills Christian School Excellence Centre while on Study Leave from St Andrew’s.

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Some have been taught an anaemic version of faith, ... [and] lack any tutoring in Christian apologetics to equip them to deal with the ... opposition they will face ... in the tertiary sphere

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# TEACH<sup>®</sup> An evaluation of teacher stressors in an era of COVID-19: An initial analysis

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**Keywords:** COVID-19; teacher stressors; teacher stress; teachers' perceptions; school lockdowns

**Abstract**  
School lockdowns prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic has required teachers to work in a climate of rapid and significant adaptation. In this paper, which is part of a larger study, we provide a summary of the effects the COVID-19 school lockdowns in 2020 had on teacher stress. The paper outlines firstly the specific teacher stressors that existed before 2020 as well as the additional stressors that became apparent during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, as identified in scholarly literature. Secondly, the paper provides a brief overview of the responses from teachers in the 48 schools within Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) to an online survey designed to explore their workplace stressors surrounding the school lockdowns in 2020. Overall, there was a general increase in workplace stress during the COVID-19 school lockdowns, but it was not to the degree that has been reported in previous literature.

**Introduction**  
In their day-to-day work, school teachers experience many types and levels of stress. The sources of such stress are often referred to as stressors. The stressors that teachers in schools experience have

been well documented by a number of educational researchers and this research has been extensively reported in past literature. Teachers report feeling pressure about issues related to student engagement, classroom management, job security, workload and technology, to name a few. When these pressures are left unchecked, or grow to levels that cause teachers to feel overwhelmed, a reduction in teachers' physical and mental health may occur. Additionally, their career choices can be impacted, causing many teachers to leave the teaching profession. Consequently, the availability of teaching staff can be impeded. Studies of teacher stressors have the potential to identify areas of greatest stress and mitigate some of these negative consequences.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, previously identified stressors have extended to include the multiple challenges associated with closing physical school campuses and the implications of these closures for teaching school-aged students in online contexts. Although the worldwide pandemic has been with us for more than a year, research into the impact of the pandemic on teachers in schools is in its infancy. To augment the already documented stressors that beset teachers and their work in schools, this study investigated school teachers' perceptions of the workplace stressors they have encountered since the COVID-19 pandemic. During the study, teachers within the Adventist Schools Australia organisation reported on how well their

schools' identified and managed workplace stressors associated with COVID-19. Teachers' perspectives were sought on the period when schools were in lockdown (when face-to-face teaching ceased) and the period when face-to-face teaching resumed. Teachers' perspectives of the future of their schools are also reported, especially in terms of the ongoing implications of how their school responded to the changes and restrictions imposed on their work due to COVID-19.

**Background**

The background literature used in this study is reported in two distinct stages. The first provides a summary of studies which report teacher stressors in and outside the classroom prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to identify the nature of these stressors, the second stage of the literature review outlined the additional stressors placed on teachers since the pandemic, including the stressors experienced during the school lockdowns in 2020.

The stressors of teachers most frequently reported in literature prior to the COVID-19 pandemic are summarised in Table 1. Other reported stressors include: pressure from governments and political pressure (Sabin, 2015); poor school leadership (Meyer, Macmillan, & Northfield, 2009); community pressure (Clement, 2017); poor teacher wellbeing (Bower & Carroll, 2017); lack of supervisor support (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011); and poor working conditions (Alhija, 2015). Often, teachers experience multiple stressors simultaneously. For example, Hanif, Tariq, and Nadeem (2011) report issues with salaries, teacher status in society, school environments, and demographic issues such as teacher age or gender. Richards (2012) found a different set of teacher stressors, including accountability, lack of parental support, overloaded classrooms, lack of control over decisions that impact them or their students, little time to relax, assessment pressure, and generally not feeling valued. The stressors identified by Clement (2017) illustrated another type of teacher stress that she believes are causes for concern for the whole community. These practical day-to-day concerns included teacher work/life balance, constantly changing curriculum, job longevity, the classroom environment, the large preparation load and the wide range of student needs.

While it was expected that teaching would become more difficult during the school lockdowns in 2020, and that general uneasiness would prevail with students and teachers and their families during this time, a whole new series of issues that impact teacher roles was identified in the literature. For example, Zhang et al. (2020) found student issues that would normally be present were heightened

during periods of school lockdown. These included student stress, behaviour and mood, as well as dealing with those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The ability of teachers to deal with maintaining student learning, and equality of assessment performance and marking, were also problems identified by teachers (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

The mental health of teachers and students was of major concern during school lockdowns (Lee, 2020). These mental health concerns were related to all students, but especially for students with pre-existing mental health conditions. For many such students, school is the place where they access their mental health support in terms of peer support groups and face-to-face sessions with counsellors or other support staff. These students often benefit from having regular routines and the stability of a fixed program. Helping not just these, but all students, learn using an online platform is a challenging task for teachers especially when dynamics in the home are upset and previous issues are heightened. For example, students are more likely to experience

“Helping ... students, learn using an online platform is a challenging task for teachers especially when dynamics in the home are upset and previous issues are heightened.”

Table 1: The top six teacher stressors prior to the COVID19 pandemic, as identified by the number of studies reporting each stressor

Stressor	No.	Key references
Classroom management issues/ discipline	10	Aldrup, Klusmann, Lüdtkke, Göllner, & Trautwein (2018) Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2017) Ferguson, Mang, & Frost (2017)
Workload	8	Alhija (2015) Spilt, Koomen & Thijs (2011) Hanif, Tariq & Nadeem (2011)
Managing relationships with colleagues and administrators	6	Clement (2017) Mackenzie (2007) Pang (2012)
Time	4	Sabin (2015) Richards (2012) Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2017)
Facilities / Resources	4	Sabin (2015) Richards (2012) Center & Steventon (2001)
Teaching unmotivated students	4	Richards (2012) Alhija (2015) Center & Steventon (2001)

“... previously identified stressors have extended to ... challenges associated with closing physical school campuses and the implications of these closures for teaching”

“students are more likely to experience domestic violence during school lockdowns ... having too few computers or workspaces or... parents not having the ability to pay school fees ... widening the [SES] learning gap”

domestic violence during school lockdowns (Cluver et al., 2020). Other issues include families in lower socio-economic areas having too few computers or workspaces for all the family to use or, according to Nicola et al. (2020), parents not having the ability to pay school fees when unemployed. This can result in widening of the learning gap between households with high and low incomes (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Some teachers have also struggled with changed management of their teaching practices during COVID-19 (Viner et al., 2020) and have reported fears around what would be different for them after their school re-opened and whether changes would be permanent or ongoing (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020).

This paper briefly overviews the first part of a study which investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workplace stressors of teachers in the 48 member schools of Adventist Schools Australia (ASA). Specifically, this study compared teachers' self-reported levels of stress before, during, and after the school lockdowns in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

during the school lockdowns in 2020, in order to identify the nature of these stressors. Both stages of this literature review considered global research on the understanding that, though different countries experienced the pandemic in different ways, the types of stress created by lockdowns in schools was similar across different countries and cultures.

The second stage of the study involved consultation with school leaders in ASA schools to help design a second survey of YES/NO teacher responses to more extensively explore areas of teacher stress. Table 2 provides a summary of the research questions being addressed in this stage of the study along with the type of literature and survey used to answer these questions.

The target population for the two stages of the survey was the cohort of approximately 1200 teachers in the 48 ASA schools across Australia. The National Director for ASA, who requested and sponsored the study, requested on behalf of the researchers that all teachers should be invited to participate in the surveys. After responses were filtered (i.e., removal of responses from teachers that were not teaching at

“Stress levels decreased when schools reopened, but these remained higher than prior to the pandemic with 19% of teachers reporting 'major' or 'extreme' stress [cf. 8%]”

Table 2: Summary of instruments used to answer the research questions

Research Question	Type of Survey	Source of Survey Items
How do ASA teachers perceive their stressors relative to the researched pre-COVID teacher stressors, and how did these stressors change from before COVID-19, during the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020 and after the COVID-19 school lockdown?	Four-point Likert-style survey where participants rate their stress levels (i.e. none, mild, major, or extreme) on each of 26 potential stressors a total of three times (i.e. before, during and after the COVID-19 school lockdown). Participants were also invited to write an extended comment at the end of the survey.	Derived from identified teacher stressors in and outside the classroom prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
What was the impact of COVID-19 on ASA teachers and students relative to literature-researched impacts?	Twelve YES/NO items with participants invited to write extended responses to explain their reasoning for each item.	Derived from identified additional stressors placed on teachers since the pandemic.

**Methodology**

The first phase of this study was a comprehensive literature review, conducted in two stages. During the first stage of the literature review, teacher stressors were identified inside and outside the classroom prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. A list was made of these stressors and this list was used to construct a first survey which used a series of Likert-style items for participants to rate their stress against each identified stressor on a four point scale before, during, and after the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020. The second stage of the literature review examined additional stressors placed on teachers since the pandemic, including those experienced

ASA schools before the pandemic etc.), there were 356 (30% of the target population) and 317 (26% of the target population) responses to Part 1 and Part 2 of the survey, respectively. The quantitative and qualitative data provided in the survey responses were analysed and cross-correlated, then these responses from the ASA teacher cohort were compared to other teachers as reported in the literature.

This project is currently in its final phase where questions identified from the responses to the two surveys are being pursued in more depth using representative focus groups from a sample of the schools surveyed. The results of this final phase of the study will be reported in a further publication.

**Results**

The quantitative data gathered from the first survey provided interesting insights into the self-reported levels of stress experienced by teachers before, during, and after the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020. Across the 26 potential stressors that participants reported on, an average of 92% of teachers experienced 'no' to 'mild' stress prior to the pandemic, with only 8% reporting 'major' or 'extreme' stress. Of all stressors, workload caused the highest level of stress prior to the pandemic with 23% of teachers reporting this as a 'major' or 'extreme' stress.

Stress levels increased during the school lockdowns with, on average, 33% of teachers reporting 'major' or 'extreme' stress across the 26 potential stressors, with workload remaining the greatest stressor at 69% of participants reporting 'major' or 'extreme' stress, followed by time management (60%). Other stressors that over one-third of teachers reported as causing 'major' or 'extreme' stress during the lockdowns were: facilities and resources; pressure from parents and community (including church); directives from government bodies; negative emotional state; general wellbeing; teaching unmotivated students; exposure to frequent

changes; differentiated abilities in the classroom; class administration requirements; changed school environment; and changing curriculum requirements.

Stress levels decreased when schools reopened, but these remained higher than prior to the pandemic with 19% of teachers reporting 'major' or 'extreme' stress, on average, across the 26 potential stressors. Only workload (44%) and time management (35%) were reported by more than 30% of teachers as causing 'major' or 'extreme' stress after the school lockdowns. Potential stressors that were reported as providing 'no' or 'little' stress at the start of the pandemic for over 80% of teachers, and remained this way during and after the school lockdowns, were: lack of supportive supervisor or team; interactions with colleagues; interactions with school leadership; status in society; having my opinions heard; and employment security.

An inductive thematic analysis of the comments offered by the teachers in their survey responses revealed a number of issues that were observed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 3 outlines the major themes that emerged from this analysis, along with some illustrative quotations from participants' comments.

Table 3: Thematic map of major issues revealed from the qualitative responses in the first survey

Major Theme	Slant <sup>1</sup>	Illustrative quotations from participants
Views of leadership (school administration) A child labourer	Positive	'Overall, our school and leadership team handled teaching and learning as well as the daily running of the school activities in a professional, calm, cool and collected manner that helped everyone remain focused and give their best by trusting in God, abiding by regulations while demonstrating flexibility, and mixing requirements with well-being.'
	Negative	'I felt that our school admin team didn't know how to lead ... a very reactionary style of leadership rather than being proactive and left many staff feeling undervalued and unappreciated. This in turn had a big impact on staff morale and well-being.'
Online learning/ technology	Positive	'As a team, I feel as though we transitioned into online/remote learning fluently.'
	Negative	'Online learning wasn't that effective, students were not that engaged as in Face-Face teaching, low morale and reduced work ethics.'
Workload	Positive	'This was to ease the stress put on the students and their parents, but I found that it allowed us time to put together quality online lessons and keep up with marking and providing students with feedback.'
	Negative	'Covid lockdown created double the workload for the same pay. So glad it's over!'
Support	Positive	'The school admin staff have been very supportive during Covid which has made it less stressful.'
	Negative	'My ongoing and biggest stress is the amount of high needs students and lack of support staff that are employed by the school to give them small group assistance.'

Note: While half of these comments in Table 3 are positively slanted and half are negatively slanted, this proportional allotment of qualitative data in this table is not intended to represent the actual proportional allotment of comments offered, as participants offered more positive comments than negative.



In addition to these major themes, the subsidiary themes that were revealed through this analysis indicated teachers also noticed changes that occurred in their teaching community (including teachers and students), communication methods, emotions and stress, engagement in learning, and their views of God. When describing how they believed the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020 would influence the future, the teachers in the study mainly commented on issues related to time, and the lack of it, for example, “Not enough time in the day to fix the issues”. Others were concerned about how students would be able to catch up on their learning, for example, “Unfortunately, many of my students did not engage at all with the online lessons, meaning that there were many gaps in their learning when we returned to school”.

**Discussion**

While the results of this study revealed a number of COVID-19 related stressors that were encountered by teachers, including stressors that teachers observed students and their parents dealing with, the teachers’ perspectives represented in the survey responses were largely more positive than those reported in recent literature about the impact of COVID-19 on schools, teachers, students and learning (Bailey & Schurz, 2020; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Cluver et al., 2020; Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Viner et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). For example, unlike the struggles experienced by many teachers with changing management practices within the school (Viner et al., 2020) and teachers fears associated with changes within schools (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020), the results of this study (especially in the quantitative data) did not indicate that teachers experienced undue high levels of stress during the periods of school lockdowns or afterwards. While many stressors were identified by teachers, these were not nearly as extreme as those reported in other studies. Instead, the teachers in this study were particularly appreciative of their school’s leaders and managers; this result is not evident in recent literature about COVID-19 effects on schools.

Some of the teacher stressors identified in the literature before COVID-19 included pressure from government sources and perceived stress related to political issues (Sabin, 2015). However, apart from the stressors identified by teachers about government health-related guidelines, this study’s participants did not focus on stressors external to their school. The primary type of stressors mentioned by the teacher-participants in this study were associated with teachers’ concerns about internal school issues such as workload, the use of technology and the support

teachers received from their colleagues and school leaders. This emphasis on inward-looking stressors rather than stressors emanating from external sources reported elsewhere, for example by Hanif, Tariq and Nadeem (2011) and Clement (2017), may be due to the intense nature of the changes that were enacted at the school-based level. That is, teachers may have felt the need to concentrate their efforts on the crucial task of teaching their students using new and online methods and this intense focus, along with a concerted effort to engage in urgent professional learning activities, may have diverted their attention away from external stressors.

Some of the issues reported preCOVID-19 by researchers, such as Hanif, Tariq and Nadeem (2011) and Clement (2017), included teacher concerns about salaries, community pressure and teacher status in society. While some of these concerns were also recognised by the teachers in our study, these stressors tended to be mentioned in minor terms and were outnumbered by stressors about student-centred and learning-focused issues such as online learning, engaging students and gaps in student learning. Although some of the stressors reported by the teachers in this study were different in nature to some of the stressors reported in the literature prior to COVID-19, some of the stressors reported in this study were similar to previous studies that cited concerns about teacher workload, the changing curriculum, teacher preparation and students’ varied needs (Clement, 2017). Similarly, many of the issues reported by teachers in other schools about the impact of COVID-19 were also mentioned by the teachers in our study. For instance, some teachers found that the additional pressures on teachers and students during COVID-19 magnified pre-existing problems as also found by Zhang et al. (2020), and that students mental health was a source of worry for teachers Lee (2020). The quality of student learning and assessment practices were noted by teachers in our study, echoing the concerns outlined by other researchers (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

As findings from educational research studies continue to be published about the impacts of COVID-19 on teachers, schools and students, our understanding of the restrictions and challenges of this pandemic will be extended. Alongside this growing awareness, no doubt some key lessons will be learned about the importance of humanising learning processes (in both online and face-to-face contexts) and the value of students’ and teachers’ wellbeing. For example, just last year, a principal from an Adventist school in New Zealand wrote an article in this journal titled *Rethinking Learning in Lockdown* (Hurlow, 2020). He reminded us of the role of relationships in learning and predicted that

“this notion will be at the forefront of our thinking and planning as schools open once again, ensuring to the best of our ability that our students are feeling positive and confident about their learning so their education flourishes” (p. 5).

Additional issues reported in the literature since the onset of the COVID-19 era will be discussed in future articles about this project.

**Limitations and future research directions**

This study purposefully sought the perspectives of teachers in the Adventist Schools Australia organisation. A more varied range of perspectives could have been gathered about how COVID-19, and its associated school lockdowns and restrictions, created stressors for teachers across a range of school systems. To supplement the teachers’ perspectives, it would be interesting to investigate the perceptions of students, administration school staff (e.g., principals), parents and community members about the effect COVID-19 has had on schools, students and teachers.

The study outlined in this article could be replicated within other school systems or it could be replicated a year or so later in the same school system to determine long term and/or widespread effects on schools as a result of COVID-19. Future iterations of this study may also be conducted to further investigate aspects of some of the results of this study. For example, the quality of student learning may be investigated longitudinally to determine the longterm impact of the virtual teaching and learning used during school lockdowns on student learning outcomes and satisfaction levels.

**Conclusion**

Several notable findings have been identified in this study thus far, which began with considering the basic common stressors detailed in the literature review conducted in the early phase of the study and then analysing them through the lens of the experiences Adventist Schools Australia teachers had before, during, and after the COVID-19 physical school lockdowns in 2020. The comparison between the teacher stressors identified in our literature review and the stressors revealed in the results of our survey shows that, although the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 did cause an overall increase in stress, the general tone of teachers’ responses was positive. One example of this is in how teachers expressed appreciation for the way their school’s management handled the unique circumstances. The relationships teaching staff have with other staff, as well as parents and students, is also another area which held relatively low impact with regards to causing teacher stress, even with the added pressures of the

COVID-19 lockdowns.

Some findings from this first phase of our study were consistent with previous research, notably, that workload and time management were the major stressors for teachers before, during and after the COVID-19 school lockdowns. Also, while stress levels have decreased since the lockdowns ended, they remain higher than before lockdowns began, suggesting more work in this space is needed to mitigate the impact. Other workplace stressors identified in this study, including support and wellbeing levels, changing communication methods, bridging learning gaps, re-motivating students, managing both a lack of time and an expanded workload in the future, and a need to be recognized by school managers. This will facilitate the formation of strategic responses that aim to reduce workplace stress experienced by teachers as they adjust their teaching practices during, and after, the COVID-19 pandemic. **TEACH**

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“teachers ... noticed changes that occurred in their teaching community... communication methods, emotions and stress, engagement in learning, and their views of God.”

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# Epistemological implications of a ‘convergent parallel mixed methods’ research design

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**Abstract**

**The philosophy of an educational research project is important to reflect upon and declare but can often be left unexplained. To address this area of thought, this study discusses the implications of the epistemological paradigm of a ‘convergent parallel mixed methods (CPMM)’ research design. An actual research piece was chosen to provide a context for the study. How the epistemological paradigm impacts upon data collection and analysis techniques, and therefore the conclusions of the research, was examined. The design was then critiqued from a biblical Christian perspective, including ideas for how it might be reformulated and used within a biblical epistemological paradigm. A significant aspect of such a way of thinking is that educational research is robust and rigorous in its process with an important aspect of growing personally and professionally in an understanding of God: who He is, of His creation, including humanity, and the interrelationships between each of these.**

**Introduction**

In educational research a paradigm is essentially the researchers’ worldviews, including the way they carry out research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, pp. 20-21; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). According to Basit (2010), paradigms are: “models, perspectives or conceptual frameworks that help us to organise our thoughts, beliefs, views and practices into a logical whole and consequently inform our research design” (pp. 14-15). Thus,

each research design is rooted in a philosophical foundation with epistemological, ontological and axiological pre-suppositions and assumptions (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Lyon, 2017). Ontology studies the nature of reality and the philosophical assumptions involved are important for knowing how to make meaning of data. Axiology studies values, thus in research these are the values that guide such studies. It involves explaining, assessing and understanding concepts of correct methodological conduct of the research. This process also includes dealing with ethical issues that need to be examined when preparing a research proposal (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, pp. 27-29). Creswell (2013, pp. 35-38) has adapted a table from Lincoln et al. which focuses on ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological stances and issues on research taken by positivists, social constructivists, postmodernists, pragmatists and critical theorists. It is clear that their thoughts on origins and being, knowledge, values and research methods is quite different to that of a biblical outlook (Beech, 2014). This study includes Christian theological foundations which are more holistic and integrated, and these will be discussed later.

The scope of this study is to focus on epistemological assumptions. Epistemology is the study of knowledge. In research, epistemology explains how one comes to know something; how one knows the truth; or in other words what counts as knowledge in the world (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 27). In this paper knowledge is understood as justified true belief (from Theory of Knowledge), but also recognising that this definition has limitations (Van de Lagemaat, 2017, pp. 22-39). Knowledge can be described further using several aspects. For example, types of knowledge which includes: firstly

“epistemology explains how one comes to know something; how one knows the truth; or in other words what counts as knowledge in the world”

knowledge by acquaintance – *knowledge of*, which is first-hand knowledge based on perception; secondly practical knowledge – *knowledge how*, which is skills based; and, lastly *knowledge by description* – knowledge that, a second-hand knowledge coming from language. Experiential learning is the combination of the first two types of knowledge. The knowledge acquired is used to broaden and deepen understanding in a particular research topic or field. In designing and conducting research it is appropriate for researchers to have a project section entitled ‘philosophical assumptions’ to communicate their worldview (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 26)

The research design chosen to be studied here is the convergent parallel (concurrent triangulation) mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2014, pp. 219-223). When the following discussion requires focus, the research paper used for this purpose is one titled ‘The influence of PBL on students’ self-efficacy beliefs in chemistry’ (Mataka & Kowalske, 2015). Firstly, this study report reviews the convergent parallel research design, followed by an epistemological analysis of the research design, then finally addresses biblical Christian perspectives of the epistemological underpinnings.

**Review of the ‘Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods’ research design**

There have been numerous definitions for mixed methods research (MMR), each with different foci, such as research design, purpose, philosophy, and research processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, pp. 2-6). A currently popular definition is one that Johnson, et al. (2007) established from a composite of nineteen different definitions:

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

However, since any definition of MMR has a variety of very different viewpoints a suitable alternative proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) is one based on core characteristics of MMR:

- collects and analyses, both persuasively and rigorously, qualitative and quantitative data (based on research questions);
- mixes (or integrates or links) the two forms of data concurrently by combining them (or merging them), sequentially by having one build on the other, or embedding one within the other;
- gives priority to one or to both forms of data

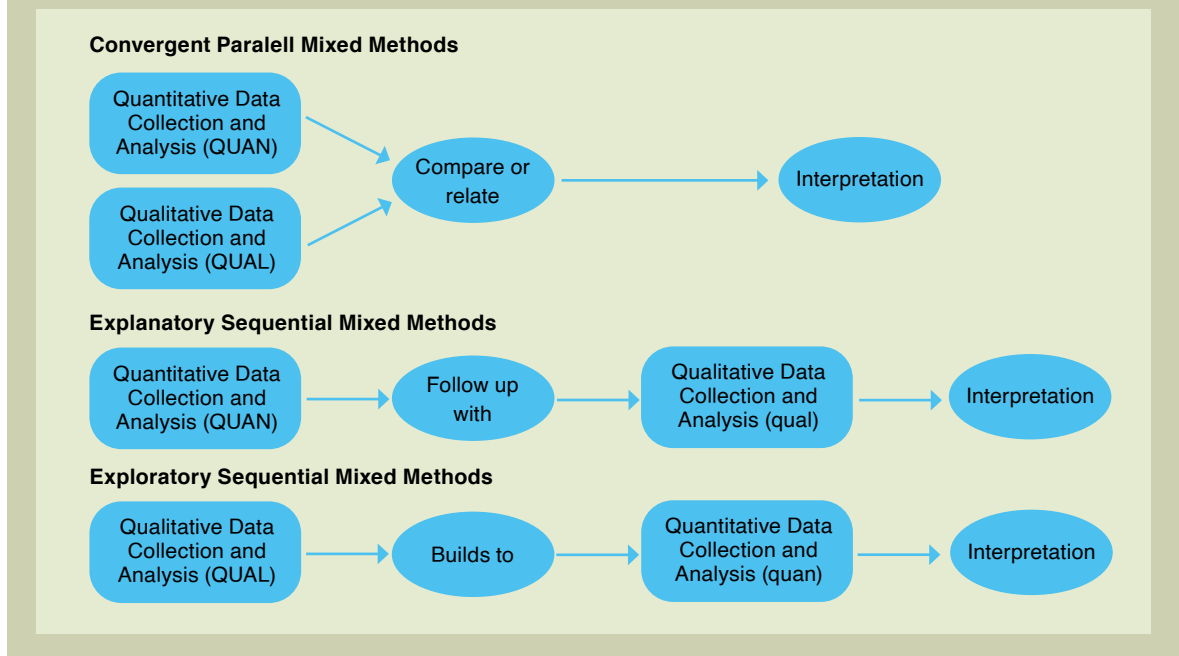
- (in terms of what the research emphasizes);
- uses these procedures in a single study or in multiple phases of a program of study;
- frames these procedures within philosophical worldviews and theoretical lenses; and
- combines the procedures into specific research designs that direct the plan for conducting the study. (pp. 2-6)

Therefore, the basis of mixed methods research (MMR) is that a combination of quantitative and qualitative data develops a more complete understanding of the research problem than research using either quantitative or qualitative data alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 5). A convergent parallel mixed methods (CPMM) design enables the researcher to converge quantitative and qualitative data using any of the approaches included in Figure 1 (Cohen, et al., 2018, p. 39; Creswell, 2014, p. 15). The data is collected and analysed independently and in parallel with each other, so that there is a comprehensive analysis of the research problem, question or issue being investigated. Thus, there is triangulation of data and the results of the separate analyses are compared to see if the tentative conclusions support each other. MMR does not improve reliability or trustworthiness, however, complementary data on the problem is hopefully produced which increases legitimation or believability (Herschell, 1999; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006; Shenton, 2004).

The core idea with this CPMM design is to collect all forms of data ‘using the same or parallel variables, constructs or concepts’ (Creswell, 2014, p. 222). A major challenge in this design is to converge (merge) the accessed and analysed data, as well as to collect differential data on similar issues and questions so that different but complementary analyses of the data can be undertaken, sustained and reliably synchronised and concluded. The following are potential approaches to ultimately forming *merged* data: side-by-side comparison, data transformation, and joint display of data. The interpretation of the data using this design is usually written in the discussion (Creswell, 2014, p. 223). Creswell compares the data sets and identifies whether there is overlap between them. Usually there are some differences in results on particular themes, issues, and concepts. These could be stated as limitations in the study, but a better solution would be to resolve the differences by returning to the data and undertake more detailed analyses, as well as possibly collecting additional information.

In the reference paper the quantitative data was collected from a Chemistry Attitude and Experiences Questionnaire (CAEQ) and the qualitative data from

Figure 1: The three basic mixed methods designs identified by Creswell (2014, p. 220)



a semi-structured interview schedule (Mataka & Kowalske, 2015, pp. 931-932). Both forms of data were collected addressing the concept of self-efficacy belief (SEB). In this paper the data merging process most closely resembled a side-by-side comparison where firstly the quantitative data was analysed, closely followed by the qualitative data (themes), and then the researchers compared and contrasted as well as interpreted in their discussion section (pp. 932-936). The researchers’ triangulation of data collection methods revealed that the qualitative findings supported the quantitative statistical results on the relationship between problem-based learning (PBL) and students’ SEBs (p. 936).

**Epistemological analysis of the research design**

After the initial formative period (1950s – 1980s) of mixed methods research there began the quantitative-qualitative paradigm debate which was prominent in the 1980s and 1990s (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, pp. 13-18). The paradigm debate was essentially about whether quantitative and qualitative data can be combined. It is known that the paradigmatic roots of quantitative research is positivism, post-positivism and the scientific paradigm, while qualitative research has its roots in the interpretive paradigm (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 34). Although the paradigm debate continues, pragmatism is typically recognised as the philosophical foundation for mixed methods research (Creswell

& Plano Clark, 2007, p. 15). Pragmatism is “the philosophical position that what works in particular situations is what is important and justified or ‘valid’ “ (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 32). The attention or focus is on the outcome(s) of the research and on the significance of the research question, instead of the methods. So multiple methods are desirable to more comprehensively address the research problem, question or issue (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, pp. 23-24). Pragmatism rejects the incompatibility stance of MMR (Cameron, 2015). Shannon-Baker lists three other mixed methods paradigms (Shannon-Baker, 2016):

- Dialectics: multiple paradigms are used and different features of the research study relate to different (contradictory) paradigms
- Transformative-emancipation: provides a mechanism for addressing the complexities of research in culturally, socially and historically complex settings
- Critical realism: views quantitative and qualitative research as accepted conditionally, subject to validation through triangulation, and it is based in the belief that theories on reality are partial, thus emphasising the significance of a variety of viewpoints.

A useful way of looking at the paradigmatic debate is that although MMR involves incompatible paradigms, methods can be combined if it is for

“ it is appropriate for researchers to have a project section entitled ‘philosophical assumptions’ to communicate their worldview ”

“ Pragmatism rejects the incompatibility of MMR ”

complementary purposes (Sale, et al., 2002). Thus, while the phenomenon is the same for different methods, different kinds of data are collected on the phenomenon which can complement each other. Shannon-Baker (2016, p. 332) sensibly advises not to argue for a single best paradigm (or perspective) for MMR, but the particular paradigm(s) is left to the discretion of the researcher as long as they justify its selection and use.

All MMR paradigms have seven common elements: ontologies, epistemologies, research purposes, practical orientation, designs, data, and methods (Biesta, 2012, as cited in Cohen et al., 2018, pp. 36-37). Each paradigm takes different views on these elements. Table 1 displays the epistemologies of four ways to classify MMR paradigms and highlights that the research designs differ considerably. Rather than forcing a coherent research paradigm, it is better to welcome the differences and make sure there is a good argument for the selected paradigm that fits with the researcher views and research focus.

The epistemological position (or general philosophical assumptions) of the reference paper has not been explicitly disclosed (Mataka & Kowalske, 2015). However, a philosophical view of constructivism has been described (p. 930) for problem-based learning (PBL), the student-centred pedagogy at the heart of this study (Yew & Goh, 2016; Hillman, 2003). The researchers' design is based on the assumption that 'neither quantitative nor qualitative designs give a full picture of the problem and its analysis, hence the need to combine both to complement each other' (Mataka & Kowalske, 2015, p. 930). It appears that the researchers in this paper follow a pragmatic paradigm as the focus is on answering a research question ('What changes in self-efficacy beliefs in chemistry occur when students participate in a PBL laboratory unit?') (p. 930). A few further epistemological aspects of pragmatism suggested in the reference paper are noted as follows:

- Qualitative data (interviews) is gathered to supplement the quantitative data to address the research problem (p. 936)
- The emphasis of the methods is to get a deeper understanding of the problem (pp. 930-931)
- Combining of data sets only occurs at the interpretation stage to ensure triangulation (p. 930)
- Inferences infer relevance of results to other contexts (pp. 936-937)
- Conclusions strengthen existing information on the relationship between PBL and the affective domain (pp. 929, 936)

- A critique of this epistemology from a biblical perspective is given below.

**Biblical Christian perspectives on epistemological underpinnings**

**Christian epistemology**

To help begin this section some characteristics of a biblical Christian epistemology (paradigm) must be introduced. The difference between the paradigms predominantly lies in the defining of true knowledge and how such knowledge is to be interpreted and used (Beech, 2014, p. 4).

In the Bible the Hebrew word for 'knowledge' comes from the root *yada'* which posits that knowledge is starting a relationship with the experienced world, and this requires not only understanding, but also commitment (a dynamic process) (Marshall, et al., 1996, pp. 657-658). Furthermore, although the Hebrew concept is generally retained in the New Testament, the Hebrew thought is modified by the fact that the Gentiles were initially ignorant of God's existence. This enhances the earlier description of knowledge from a Christian perspective, while the common understanding of knowledge is rather loosely defined as thought and transfer of knowledge.

Similarly to knowledge, 'truth' has two meanings in the Old Testament: intellectual (facts which may be true or false) and faithfulness (Marshall et al., 1996, p. 1213; Ramsdell, 1951). The latter meaning is much more common. In the New Testament 'truth' can have the Old Testament meanings or an intellectual meaning derived from classical Greek. Thus, 'truth' in the Bible is more than an intellectual abstract truth (passive), but sees truth as related to life (dynamic) (Knight, p. 183). There are different truths coming from a variety of knowledge sources. These truths originate from God (and Christ), the Creator of everything, and the source of all truth or knowledge (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-17). The statement 'All truth is God's truth' is an important principle, although some have reservations (Sproul, 2009; Mathison, 2012). Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin have all expressed similar ideas. However, it is important to not only know 'All truth is God's truth', but also to live what Piper said 'All truth exists to display more of God and awaken more love for God' (Piper, 2009).

The Bible is the primary source of Christian epistemology and a major source of truth obtained through special revelation (Knight, 2006, pp. 178-180). As well as revelatory knowledge other sources of knowledge are used in seeking truth: intuitive knowledge, authoritative knowledge, logical knowledge (reasoning), and empirical knowledge (Knight, 2006, pp. 22-25). Furthermore, although revealed knowledge is God communicating His

Table 1: *Epistemology of four mixed methods p-paradigms* [Modified from Shannon-Baker's table (2016, pp. 323-324) with other sources included]

Mixed Methods Paradigm (insightful source)	Epistemology
Pragmatism (Morgan, 2009)	<p><b>Data Collection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researchers collect data by what works to address the research question (practicality) (Creswell &amp; Plano Clark, 2007, p. 24)</li> </ul> <p><b>Methods/Analysis Techniques</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theory is connected to data both before and after data collection (abduction)</li> <li>• The emphasis involves identifying practical results</li> <li>• The researcher can pursue objectivity and/or subjectivity depending on the research context</li> </ul> <p><b>Conclusions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The exchangeability of results can be examined by determining the level of context-specificity and the generalizability of the study</li> <li>• It can be concluded that MMR combines features of quantitative and qualitative approaches and establishes practical solutions</li> </ul>
Dialectics ('dialectical pluralism') (Mertens, 2012)	<p><b>Data Collection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data sets are collected that may have an element of conflict</li> </ul> <p><b>Methods/Analysis Techniques</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is an emphasis on connections and differences between theory and data sets</li> <li>• Analysis highlights comparisons between data sets</li> <li>• During analysis the researcher is reflective, looking for connections between theories, data sets and results</li> </ul> <p><b>Conclusions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produced by combining diverse viewpoints/data sets</li> <li>• Directly addresses divergent results and highlights both convergence and divergence in data sets</li> </ul>
Transformative-Emancipation ('transformative') (Romm, 2015)	<p><b>Data Collection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collection is focused on supporting transformative change (Romm, 2015, p. 414)</li> </ul> <p><b>Methods/Analysis Techniques</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theory and data are connected by using a theoretical framework from the community's perspective</li> <li>• Includes community in design and the application</li> <li>• The researcher has a healthy relationship with the community involved and retains objectivity to avoid potential bias</li> <li>• Communities of practice define what counts as acceptable 'ways of knowing' and the researcher and the communities being researched form partnerships based on equality of power and respect (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 53)</li> </ul> <p><b>Conclusions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conclusions are within relevant community socio-historical contexts and power dynamics</li> <li>• Give comprehensive social justice associated goals and issues to guide the research process</li> </ul>
Critical Realism (Maxwell & Mitterpalli, 2010)	<p><b>Data Collection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection of reflection and perception-based data is encouraged</li> </ul> <p><b>Methods/Analysis Techniques</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifies the partial and incomplete nature of theory to describe/capture data</li> <li>• The methods highlight perspectives and perspective taking and is process-oriented</li> <li>• Relationships are highlighted throughout and it is believed that complete objectivity is not possible</li> <li>• Knowledge constructed through individual opinions and perceptions (constructivist)</li> <li>• Retroduction is a central analytical tool used in critical realism (Olson, 2007). It is the 'reasoning about why things happen including why the data appear the way they do' (p. 1).</li> </ul> <p><b>Conclusions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Causal conclusions can be made when emphasizing the context</li> <li>• Provides an approach to establishing context-based validity and highlights the significance of mental aspects and perception</li> </ul>

“The difference between the paradigms lies in the defining of true knowledge and how such knowledge is to be interpreted and used”

divine will, these are all God-given sources of knowledge (Isaiah 48:17; Proverbs 2:6). However, even though God-given, knowledge can unfortunately be used for evil. All the sources of knowledge are complementary, with the Bible and its worldview giving a ‘foundation and a context’ for all knowledge (Knight, 2006, p. 226). In other words, as the Bible is from God and He is the origin of all truth, the Bible contextualises by guiding and unifying (or integrating) all knowledge. The other sources of knowledge are related to the framework of Scripture (p. 182). Arthur Holmes’ classic publication “All Truth is God’s Truth” (1983) discussed these matters in detail. The unified truth cannot be in conflict as all truths have the same author, God. It is human knowledge which is incomplete and limited (‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.’ – 1 Corinthians 13:12, ESV). Therefore, there is extensive room for humility in the epistemological endeavour (Ephesians 4:2-3). Only God knows the absolute truth. Research is often regarded as an activity which searches for knowledge and the Christian researcher can see this as discovering, or being exposed to, God’s knowledge.

Christian epistemology is concerned with committed and justified belief (Sellars, 1992, pp. 154-155; Wolfe, 1982). It is important that a faith position is well-grounded and can endure testing. This relates to the Theory of Knowledge definition of knowledge presented earlier as justified true belief (Van de Lagemaat, 2017, pp. 22-39).

**A critique of the design from a biblical perspective**  
This critique highlights the limitations of a design without a biblical perspective, while appreciating the authors of the reference paper aim is to address the research question not discover ‘truth’. As was foreseeable, the CPMM research design in the reference paper (Mataka & Kowalske, 2015) does not use the Bible as a primary source of epistemology. The data used (quantitative and qualitative) tend to only acquire empirical knowledge, which may limit the completeness of addressing the research problem by not including other knowledge sources. There is no recognition that human knowledge is deficient (i.e. humanity is sinful and fallible). Human beings are the discoverers, not the originators, of truth, and that scientific inquiry is built upon presuppositions (Gaebelein, 1964, cited in Knight, 2006, p. 181). As previously indicated, the reference article’s research design seems to hold to a pragmatic paradigm and restricts the epistemology to this paradigm, rather than allowing for epistemological diversity (Beech & Beech, 2016, p. 4). However, this research design provides a more holistic view of the research

problem, in that multiple factors are investigated, and a fuller picture of the problem is obtained. This is a typical example where MMR is more about the mixing of data and sources.

**Proposed design from a biblical Christian epistemological paradigm**

Such a biblical Christian design has ‘an epistemology that credits God as the source of all knowledge and acknowledges the mandate God has given us to unhide His knowledge’ (Beech & Beech, 2016, p. 12). Faith in the God of the Bible and His creation provides a pre-suppositional start for the development of a comprehensive epistemology (p. 9). In order to have a more complete set of conclusions, including epistemological viewpoints, a study will ideally acquire knowledge through data from all sources (or as many as possible): intuitive, authoritative, logical, empirical, and revelational (cf. ways of knowing in Van de Lagemaat, 2017). The Christian worldview has an open-mind to a variety of epistemological perspectives (Herschell, 2019a). Thus, a ‘paradigm of inquiry’ based in a Christian worldview is introduced and identifies that there is a number of important ways of inquiring in order to acquire new knowledge. It is worth noting that other worldviews may also come to this open-minded perspective. When expressing a Christian epistemology, it is important to consider the qualities of alternative ideas of truth or knowledge, such as relative/absolute, objective/subjective, collective/individual, internal/external. Rather than saying only one perspective is correct, it is important to recognise that they all have an element of correctness depending on the context. “That is, the nature of ‘truth’ is found as you identify when to apply which perspective, rather than in trying to identify which perspective is correct.” (Herschell, 2019b, p. 4).

Given that the relational epistemology and background for research comes from the Old Testament meanings for ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’, it can be said that:

From the Christian perspective, the aim and end of research is not merely to gain knowledge for the sake of knowledge creation. Rather, it is to advance our knowledge of God through the development of a greater understanding of Him, of His Creation, of His created beings and of the relationships that bind them together. This becomes, then, the first purpose, for research. (Beech & Beech, 2016, p. 9)

**Conclusion**

Within the context of educational research, a Christian epistemological paradigm, which is holistic and relational, is important as it guides research design. A Christian epistemology recognises God as

the source of all knowledge and humanity has the task of discovering or unfolding this knowledge which then leads to worship. If this Christian paradigm is not deliberately used then the knowledge acquired in a study will be misrepresented as it fails to acknowledge a divine agency. At the foundation of every educational theory and system is an epistemology which gives it structure and interpretive meaning (Knight, 2006, p. 182).

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# Evaluating evidence for the historical resurrection: A content-centered approach to the resurrection

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**Abstract**

**The purpose of this article was to investigate the use of deliberative decision-making lessons, such as the rank-order format, for evaluating historical events. In this lesson, students act as an ancient historian by evaluating historical pieces of evidence for the early Christian’s claim that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. Students evaluated eight separate pieces of evidence discussed in historical scholarship by rank-ordering the evidences from strong to weak.**

**Introduction**

Engaging in a pluralistic society demands that citizens engage with a variety of ideologies, including the religious ideologies within society (Prothero, 2007). An overwhelming percentage of Americans and Australians, over 75%, identify as religious (Pew Research, 2012, 2014). With 75% of Americans and Australians subscribing to religious beliefs, educators must help prepare students for the religious ideas present in society. By ignoring religion, students are ill-prepared to enter a complex social environment.

Scholars arguing for religious literacy are growing in number (Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007). One prominent religious literacy advocate, Stephen Prothero (2007), defined religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use the religious terms,

symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life” (p. 17). Prothero’s definition applies to all religiously diverse societies that seek to develop a cohesive society. With over 75% of Americans and Australians identifying as religious, and nearly 70% of Americans and 67% Australians identifying as Christians, religious assumptions and practices, and especially Christian perspectives, are inevitable in society (Pew Research, 2012, 2014). With a high percentage of individuals identifying as Christian, fostering religious literacy regarding Christian beliefs includes investigating the central religious belief within Christianity, the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Prothero, 2007).

This article presents how deliberative decision-making lessons, precisely a rank-order lesson, might support students’ critical thinking skills regarding historical evidences for religious beliefs, such as Christianity’s belief in the historical resurrection. This article will first explore deliberative decision making developed by Robert Stahl and others (1995), the deliberative decision method and the rank-order format. Next, the authors will review the historical background of the resurrection and review the meaning of the resurrection in historic, orthodox Christianity. Then examining what history means in terms of investigating an event such as the resurrection. Finally, this article will discuss the implementation of rank-order decision-making activity.

**Review of literature**

The concept of active learning and decision-making is one strength of deliberative decision-making activities. Active learning theory holds that “students internalize information best when they are directly involved in their own learning” (Kunselman & Johnson, 2004, p. 87). Decision making, according to Stahl et al. (1995), includes five phases of thinking: conceptual thinking, relational thinking, decisional thinking, affective thinking, and reflective thinking. Conceptual thinking is critical to understanding the ideas and beliefs of individuals. Conceptual thinking “stresses adequate comprehension, description, and clarification of available information, of a situation, phenomenon, or problem, and of the meaning(s) of data and relevant concepts” (Casteel & Stahl, 1997, p 15). Relational thinking seeks the interrelatedness of information. Furthermore, relational thinking emphasizes acknowledgment and construction of connections, associations, or fits among situations, information, concepts, beliefs, or situations. In the third phase of thinking, decisional thinking, individuals or groups consider all the possible alternatives and their resulting consequences, along with personal preferences and needs, to make a decision. The fourth phase of thinking is affective thinking which stresses that individuals or groups give careful consideration to preferences, priorities, emotions, commitments, and value orientations. Finally, Stahl et al. (1995) consider reflective thinking as a unique way of thinking. A way that individuals or groups can only engage in after one or more decisions steps have been experienced through the first four types of thinking. Reflective thinking occurs once a decision has been made, and comprises an individuals’ or groups’ processing and assessment of information and values to lead to more decisions.

Each of the five phases of thinking contributes to deliberate decision- making exercises, and each of the five phases of thinking is enacted when students decide the strengths and weaknesses of the historical evidences for a claim. Before evaluating the various evidences for the resurrection, students must engage in conceptual thinking so that they have adequate comprehension of the relevant data (Casteel & Stahl, 1997). To effectively assign value to each of the evidences, understanding the historical significance of the various evidences is crucial. Next, students must build upon their conceptual thinking by understanding the relationships the various historical evidences share. The conceptual and relational levels of thinking provides the students’ foundation to decide all the possible ways the evidences could be evaluated and the consequences of such evaluations. As students make decisions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each piece of historical evidence,

students move to the next phase of thinking in which they take account of their preferences and biases. Students might investigate how their own cultural and social biases and preferences might differ from other individuals, including contemporaries of Jesus and his disciples. After evaluating the evidences and ranking them accordingly, students might reflect on their own selections, how they differ from their peers, and what might account for such differences. Using the historical resurrection as a case study enables students to engage in each of Casteel and Stahl’s (1997) phases of learning as they engage in a deliberate-decision making activity.

**Historical background: What the resurrection is and what it is not**

Christianity remains the majority religion in the United States (Eck, 2011; Pew Research, 2014). Christianity, however, is not monolithic in articles’ faith or practice. Significant differences exist between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christianities. Furthermore, Protestantism is further divided into many denominations (i.e., Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Episcopalian, Pentecostal and others), which are further variegated into sub-denominations of Baptists, Lutherans, or others. Even with the vast differences across Christianity, Christians have historically held to the belief that Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross, buried, and raised to newly embodied life by God three days later (Wright, 1999; 2002).

The resurrection plays a nonpareil role in the Christian tradition. No form of early Christianity known in history existed without the belief that Jesus was both crucified on a Roman cross and subsequently raised by God bodily three days later (Wright, 1999). The universality of belief in the resurrection is striking because Christian communities, whether ancient or modern, seemed to have few universally shared beliefs. Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christianity itself would be futile, according to the Apostle Paul, writer of over half the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor 15). If there were no historical resurrection, Christianity would have disappeared the way other failed-messianic movements disappeared after its would-be messiah was killed (Wright, 1999). Other messianic movements occurred in the Second-Temple period (516 BC to 70 AD), but those leaders who were executed, like Simon Bar Giora in 70 AD, were not proclaimed as resurrected into new bodily life, nor did a religious movement explode from their followers (Wright, 2002). A sustained faith around a crucified and dead messiah simply would not have happened. Jesus was not the only messianic in the second-temple period, but Jesus was the only one proclaimed as vindicated by God in the ‘present’ and

“By ignoring religion, students are ill-prepared to enter a complex social environment.”

“Students might investigate how their own cultural and social biases and preferences might differ from other individuals, including contemporaries of Jesus”

raised from the dead (Wright, 1999, 2002).

Outside the Christian faith, the resurrection was understood to mean a bodily life proceeding after whatever life-after-death might be immediately experienced by the departed (Wright, 2002). The ancient pagan world denied any possibility of a resurrected body. While there may have been existing in a shadowy afterlife like Hades, as in Homer, or as disembodied souls seeking release from bodily prison, the ancient pagan world agreed unanimously that dead people do not rise again in their bodies from the grave (Wright, 2003). Contrary to the pagan world, Christians were nearly unanimous regarding the belief in a literal resurrection despite having few other beliefs agreed upon with such universality. Wright (2008) summarized the belief about what the resurrection is and is not saying,

“In modern education, whether sectarian or secular, there is often limited coverage on the historical evaluation of non-tested topics, and even less emphasis on decision-making”

resurrection itself then appears as what the word always meant in the ancient world. It wasn't a way of talking about life after death. It was a way of talking about new bodily life after whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death. It was, in other words, life after life after death. (p. 38)

To claim that Jesus bodily rose from the grave is not merely a faith claim. Rather, the claim is that Christians can argue Jesus' resurrection on historical grounds, based upon the historical records available to us. Before examining the rank-order lesson used in a classroom, next, the authors will define in what sense the resurrection is historical.

**The leading events of the resurrection**

Like resurrection, “history” also has multiple meanings (Stahl et al., 1995). The relationship between history as a discipline of study and the resurrection of Jesus, as a supernatural event within history, is complicated. Is an event like the resurrection open to historical inquiry? New Testament theologian and historian N. T. Wright (2003) first defined what sense the resurrection is “historical.” History can mean a) an event that happened, whether the event can be proved to have happened or not; b) a significant event meaning the event had popular significance; c) a provable event; d) an event that was written about, or could have been written about; e), “history” might mean history as modern historians understand history via a post-Enlightenment worldview (1992, p 12-13). Wright (2003) argued for the resurrection event in terms of the first categorical meaning of “history,” namely a historical event that can be proved to have happened or not. To reach a historical judgment on whether the resurrection occurred or not requires individuals to investigate the events surrounding the resurrection.

According to biblical and extra-biblical sources, such as Josephus (2017, para. 3) and Tacitus (n.d.,

para. 54), Jesus was a first-century Jewish religious leader who was executed by the Romans on charges from the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The religious leaders of Jesus' day believed Jesus to be a law-breaker and blasphemer (John 18-19). Jesus was popular with the people, evidenced in his welcome to Jerusalem by a large crowd proclaiming Jesus the “King the Israel” (Jn 12:12-13). However, the religious leaders felt differently and, since Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead in John 11, the religious leaders began plotting Jesus' death (Jn 11:53). The religious leaders were unable to put Jesus to death (Jn 18:31) and therefore sought Pontius Pilate to execute Jesus. While Pilate at first refused to execute Jesus, he finally acquiesced to the demands of the religious leaders (Jn 19:12, 16). Before execution, Jesus was flogged and then nailed to the cross where he hung until his death. A follower of Jesus acquired his body from the Romans and laid Jesus into his tomb (Jn 19:38-42). Jesus was placed in a tomb on Friday, and the empty tomb was discovered Sunday morning.

**Designing the lesson**

In modern education, whether sectarian or secular, there is often limited coverage on the historical evaluation of non-tested topics, and even less emphasis on decision-making exercises (Byford, 2013). The resurrection, along with religion in general, is minimized in education as a non-tested topic. Students should be prepared for the post-K-12 world, and education should include the religious beliefs existent in a religious culture (Eck, 2001).

One strategy to help educators actively engage students is through deliberative decision-making lessons. These activities encourage students to carefully consider the investigated material, its relevant information, possible options, and implications. (Stahl et al., 1995). Regarding the resurrection, such a remarkable claim is offered as a matter-of-fact in Christian education, thereby ignoring the historical issues and implications connected with the resurrection. The resurrection as a historical event can be examined historically. Students, whether religious or non-religious, can investigate the various historical arguments and evidences for the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. In such active, investigative situations, teaching functions more like holistic formation; Christian education can be rather than an informational transfer akin to indoctrination.

Christian education has been, for too long, concerned more with “information rather than formation” (Smith, 2009). For example, forming critical thinking, an essential part of any educational program, cannot happen in an environment where learning is one-way, from the teacher, who is

informed, to students, who lack information. To promote students' critical thinking skills, forming deliberative decision-making skills is possible in school settings (Stahl et al., 1995). Such skills require active learning. The rank-order lesson format is one active learning method that encourages deliberate decision-making and can enhance decision making in a religious studies class.

The authors found the development and differentiation of pedagogical strategies useful to students when engaging in deliberative decision-making issues. In particular, the rank-order format was selected because individuals had a historical situation for investigation requiring the use of multiple stages of thinking (Stahl et al., 1995). Stahl's lesson design remains useful today. Investigating biblical concepts such as the resurrection incorporates decision-making processes, which are relevant in today's classroom. Students' increasingly demand links to societal issues; so incorporating decision-making approaches allows students to become active agents in studying biblical history and societal implications. The decision-making curriculum provides students a biblical values-centered lens while encouraging collaborative discussion, critical discourse, and deconstructing biblical events using the affective and cognitive domains.

Casteel and Stahl (1997) wrote that rank-order lessons are useful when investigating historical problems with options that are:

all specifically stated; limited in number and limited to only those specified; homogeneous options, i.e., either all “good” or all “undesirable” options; all clearly stated or recognized within the situation and context they find themselves; the only ones that can be considered and decided upon in the situation and to be selected in terms of the priorities of the individual or group such that they are arranged in order from most preferred to least preferred. (p. 11)

This historical problem regarding the historical resurrection meets the requirements of Casteel and Stahl (1997). Rank-order lessons require individuals or groups to make deliberate decisions based on the perceived importance, value, or priority of the options relative to others (Stahl et al., 1995). Students must engage with content while also evaluating the interrelatedness of the information. Upon evaluation of the evidence, individuals then must decide the strength or weakness of the evidences by ranking sequentially, from first to last, each of the varying historical evidences. Rank-order encounters offer students the opportunity and ability to engage in activities that require decisions in ranked, value-laden situations, but also helps students to examine how such decisions, once made, are explained (Casteel and Stahl, 1997). The value of continuing to rank

options down to the final two is essential. Stahl et al. (1995) explains that while in some decision-ranking scenarios students can assume their top choice may work, continuing to rank the remaining options ensures “that students continually select the top option from among those remaining, all the way down to the final two” (p. 23).

Before the lesson is presented in class, educators must introduce the students to the historical problem of Jesus' resurrection and the empty tomb and the evidence for the resurrection. Educators must make clear the homogeneous nature of the various pieces of evidence in that each evidence is “good,” and there is no “right” or “wrong” way to rank the options. One strength of the rank-order format is the expectation that students not only rank all the options for a given historical problem but explain their reasoning for the ranking provided (Casteel & Stahl, 1997). Students should be prepared to give their rankings and defend them in class. Using the rank-order approach creates an active learning environment in which students engage in decision-making exercises.

When studying Christianity, and in particular the Christian belief about the resurrection of Jesus, it is essential that students engage with the historical evidences for the religious claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. Rather than students passively learning through direct instruction some historical evidences for the resurrection, the authors wanted students to be actively involved by becoming the historian and ranking the evidences for the resurrection from strongest to weakest. Kunselman and Johnson (2004) listed specific benefits of historically-based case studies saying such lessons help students a) better understand complex issues and complicated issues; b) discuss policy and decision-making ideologies; and c) engage in informative and focused classroom discussion. Using deliberative-decision making activities, like Stahl and others rank-order method, provides students with a “valid strategy to engage students in higher-order thinking skills, ability to retain content knowledge, and provide active learning for a historically lecture driven subject” (Byford, 2013).

**Evidence(s) for the resurrection**

The eight pieces of evidence presented are not sufficient to establish a belief in the resurrection of Jesus. However, the evidences presented are necessary if the resurrection is argued for and believed to be true historically. Beginning with the evidence concerning women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb and the risen Jesus, Craig (1997) indicated that if the resurrection story was fabricated, women, having low social status, would not have remained the first witnesses in the stories retelling.

“Students' increasingly demand links to societal issues; so incorporating ... decision-making approaches allows students to become active agents in studying biblical history and societal implications.”

If the women had not actually seen Jesus, including women’s testimonies was too risky. These important women were named in the resurrection accounts, and it is improbable their names would have been attached to a story that they could not verify (Craig, 1997). The body of Jesus was never produced. Different answers have been offered for this. For example, Crossan (2009) argued that Jesus’ body was never produced because he was buried in a shallow grave and eaten by wild dogs. Others (Craig, 1997; Siniscalchi, 2014; Wright, 2003) argued that Jesus’ body was never produced because it was raised from the dead. Another evidence deals with the first disciples’ testimonies and the subsequent consequences for proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection. Most of the early disciples of Jesus were persecuted and killed for their faith (Habermas, 2013). One disciple in particular, Peter denied Jesus before his crucifixion for fear of his own life, yet after the resurrection experience concerning Jesus, Peter willingly suffered beatings and execution (Acts 4). Next, Paul’s conversion from persecutor of the Christian faith to missionary and evangelist for Christian faith was directly related to his visions of Jesus (Ehrman, 2008; Siniscalchi, 2014).

Furthermore, in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explicitly named individuals who also claimed to see Jesus risen from the dead, individuals who could be sought and questioned about their experience (Habermas, 2013; Siniscalchi, 2014). The disciples first proclaimed that Jesus was raised from the dead in the same city where he was crucified and buried. Proclaiming in Jerusalem would have been fruitless if there were no historical evidences because of the large population able to investigate the claims first-hand. Perman (2018) provided a summary of these listed historical evidences.

When the students engage with the multiple evidences for the resurrection, students must engage varying levels of thinking to engage in deliberate-decision making. There is no clear right and wrong way to rank-order the evidences from strong to weak. Students must not only understand the content but evaluate the importance of the evidences. All of the evidences are homogenous; each piece of evidence is “good” (Casteel & Stahl, 1997). Rank-order lessons require students to keep engaging with the options until all available options have been ranked. “This strategy forces individuals to constantly consider the relative importance of several alternatives to one another in the context of a particular problem or situation” (Casteel & Stahl, 1997, p. 11). While the rank-order for the students will differ, the explanation and justification of the various rankings, even for numbers seven and eight, provide insight into

how students evaluated and judged the varying evidences.

**Procedures and findings**

Students indicated interest in examining the historical evidence for a religious claim, particularly claims central to the Christian faith. By playing the role of a historian tasked with evaluating and ranking various evidences for the resurrection, students learned content surrounding historical arguments employed in the Christian faith while participating in learning through higher critical thinking processes (see Appendix 1). Rankings varied among the evidences.

These statements provide insight into student justifications for ranking the various rankings as more or less weighty. Hannah, a senior, argued that mass sightings (#5) were the greatest evidence for the resurrection because of the unlikelihood of mass hallucination saying “you can’t fake hundreds of people seeing the living Jesus.” Gabriel, another senior, also believed the mass sightings (#5) were most important saying “the more witnesses, the more accurate the fact.” Katelyn, a ninth-grade student, argued the groups’ testimony (#3) and ultimate death because “they wouldn’t have trusted, followed, and believed in something that was not real.” Jayden, another ninth-grade student, felt the group testimonies (#5) most significant because the disciples “gave their lives for it.” Other students selected other evidences for interesting reasons, too. Anna, a ninth-grade student, chose women as first witnesses (#1) as the most important evidence for the historical resurrection because allowing women’s testimony was a “huge cultural no-no.” Other selections were chosen, too. John Robert, a ninth-grade student, selected Paul’s conversion (#4) saying “Paul would have no reason to convert” without his vision of the resurrected Jesus. Senior, Devin, chose the admission of an empty tomb in the Jewish *Toledoth Jesu* saying this document is “proof something happened.”

Whatever the individual rankings assigned, the students’ responses reflect varying opinions on the most important evidence for the resurrection. The value of a rank-order lesson is not in students recording the right answers. The value of the rank-order format is in how the students analyze, compare, critique, order, evaluate, and justify their selections. In the cases where students selected the same evidence as the “strongest”, the justifications for the rankings were different. Individual engagement with content and various stages of thinking were factors in producing historians with different perspectives on the best evidence for Jesus’ resurrection. This activity helped demonstrate how individual (future) historians might investigate the same historical evidence,

actively engage in analyzing and reflecting on the data, and decide differently on the data’s significance. The authors assessed the results of the activity as encouraging.

**Conclusion**

While this activity intended students evaluate, and judge historical evidences for the Christian claim concerning Jesus’ resurrection, this activity was also undertaken to develop historical empathy in students by engaging them in the learning process. Concurrently, students engaged with content concerning historical evidences supporting Christianity’s claim that Jesus rose from the dead. Whether or not a student finds evidences convincing, engaging with such ideas fosters religious literacy regarding Christian’s belief regarding Jesus’ resurrection. This exercise helps students understand that traditional Christianity does not describe Jesus’ resurrection as spiritual, but rather as a historical event in space and time, an event open to historical inquiry, validation, or falsification (Wright, 2002). Engaging with this historical exercise will provide students a historical frame of reference when they meet individuals talking about the “risen Jesus” or the resurrection by helping them understand the historical claims underlying such a statement.

When given the list of historical evidences for the resurrection, students may or may not consider the evidence sufficient to believe in the bodily resurrection. In rank-order activities such as this lesson, finding the “right” answer is not the goal. This activity ensures students engage in higher-order critical thinking when they investigate the varying evidences for the resurrection. Doing so demanded students to think, categorize, analyze, empathize, and finally judge various historical evidences (Stahl et al, 1995). Such higher-order thinking activities help students internalize information because students are actively engaged in the learning process (Kunselman & Johnson, 2004). The study of religious beliefs, in particular, Christian beliefs, which are powerful forces in society, requires such active learning so as to help enable students to function as active citizens who are informed regarding religion (Eck, 2001; Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007). These skills are necessary components of an education which prepares students for post K-12 life.

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“Hannah, a senior, argued that mass sightings ... were the greatest evidence for the resurrection because of the unlikelihood of mass hallucination”

“The study of religious beliefs, in particular, Christian beliefs, which are powerful forces in society, requires such active learning so as to help enable students to function as ... citizens”



**Appendix A  
Evidences for the Empty Tomb**

**Directions**

Read through this rank-order lesson and, acting as a historian, rank the evidences from most significant to least significant evidence for the resurrection. After ranking the evidences, indicate your reasons for the rankings selected.

N.T. Wright (2008), a preeminent New Testament theologian, wrote about the “empty tomb” in his book *Surprised by Hope* stating: in order to explain historically how all the early Christians came to the belief they held, that Jesus had been raised, we have to say at least this: that the tomb was empty, except for some grave clothes, and that they really did see and talk with someone who gave every appearance of being a solidly physical Jesus, though a Jesus who was strangely changed, more strangely than they were able fully to describe. Both the meetings and the empty tomb are therefore necessary if we are to explain the rise of the belief and the writing of the stories as we have them. Neither by itself was sufficient; put them together, though, and they provide a complete and coherent explanation for the rise of the early Christian belief. (p. 59)

Below is a list of evidences for the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. After reading the evidences, assign a significance rank to each (1 = most significant, 8 = least significant) and your reasoning for your ranking.

1. The Gospels include women as the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, something you would not do if you were making up a resurrection story due to the low-cultural status of women and their word.
2. The body of Jesus was never produced.
3. The disciples claimed to have seen, touched, ate with, etc., the risen Jesus. Would they have willingly been crucified, beheaded, and executed for a lie?
4. Paul’s conversion from a persecutor of the church to a proclaimer of Jesus’ truth can only be explained by an appearance of the resurrected Christ.
5. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul mentions a list of names of individuals who saw the risen Jesus suggesting that at the time of his writing, they were alive and could be interviewed. He also mentioned a group of 500 who saw Jesus together. Science affirms that mass hallucinations are extremely unlikely.
6. Peter, who denied Jesus three times to a crowd of commoners before Jesus’ execution, was willing to go toe-to-toe with religious and governmental officials boldly with the message of Jesus’ resurrection and is believed to have been crucified upside down.
7. Early Jewish sources admit the empty tomb thereby providing extra-biblical evidence of resurrection (ex. Toldoth Jesu).
8. Early disciples did not go to obscure parts of the Roman empire to proclaim the resurrection, but began right in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and buried. Evidence to the contrary would not have been hard to produce had there been such evidence.

Assign a significance rank (1 to 8) to each evidence	Evidence	Why was this (relative) ranking assigned?
	Women as first witnesses	
	The body of Jesus never produced	
	Disciples’ group testimonies	
	Paul’s conversion	
	Mass sightings	
	Peter’s conversion	
	Jewish sources admit an empty tomb	
	Location of initial gospel proclamation	

**Discussion Starters**

1. What are the implications surrounding what one believes about the resurrection of Jesus?
2. How would Christianity be different if Jesus’ resurrection was originally believed to be purely spiritual?
3. What would modern, intellectual culture say about the belief in a literal, bodily resurrection?
4. What would have happened to the disciples had Jesus never been seen after his crucifixion?
5. In your opinion, what is the central issue concerning the debates about the resurrection of Jesus?

**BOOK REVIEW**

*Burnout: A guide to identifying recovery.*

Authors: Gordon Parker, Gabriella Tavella and Kerrie Eyres. (2021).  
Allen & Unwin, 273 pages.  
ISBN: 978 1 76087 806 1

**Glenys Perry**

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**This book is written jointly by Professor Gordon Parker AO, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of New South Wales, and founder of the Black Dog Institute; Gabriella Tavellais a research officer at the University of New South Wales, completing a PhD on burnout; and Kerrie Eyres AM, a psychologist and writer. Their intention is to provide helpful insights not only for those suffering from burnout, but also their families and friends, health care professionals, along with employers seeking to free workplaces from conditions that contribute to burnout.**

Teachers, and health care professionals have been identified as ‘frontline workers’ in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. Current research (see Bibliography) indicates higher levels of burnout than usual amongst teachers on a global scale resulting from the adjustments needed for teaching virtually via remote learning, and the uncertainty surrounding rapid school shutdowns in response to the pandemic. The content of this very readable book promises to be especially helpful for jaded teachers, school administrators and the parents of school children. The book is divided into three parts:

**Part I What is burnout?**

An expanded definition is provided beyond the three key symptoms as described by the World Health Organization, weighing up how burnout differs from depression, with new insights into the biology of burnout, producing changes in the body and brain.

**Part II Causes of burnout**

The seed and the soil, deals with occupations considered high risk, characteristics of toxic workplaces, and how perfectionism, rarely

recognised as a risk factor, can contribute to personal burnout.

Part III Overcoming burnout and rekindling the flame. Guidelines are provided for managers, workers and caregivers for resolving burnout.

Appendices provide valuable resources and tools to work out whether a person suffers burnout or not: The Sydney Burnout Measure (SBM); Workplace triggers; Perfectionism scale; with Resources for workers and caregivers.

The authors acknowledge that while work can be a source of burnout, caring roles associated with family life may also produce burnout. Within the medical world, there has been no formal diagnosis of burnout as there is for anxiety or depression, hence difficulties arise in offering the best remedial approaches. In order to support the work of professionals in their diagnoses the authors argue that a broader set of symptoms needs to be identified. From their research, they developed *The Sydney Burnout Measure* that helps to quantify levels of burnout. The questionnaire associated with this tool (Appendix A), is available to the reader to help determine their level of burnout (or otherwise). In fact, it is suggested within the Introduction, that if the reader needs help fast, “go to Appendix A and complete the burnout questionnaire. Review your score and speed-read Part III for management suggestions” (p. 3).

A chapter is dedicated to perfectionism, viewed as “the key personality style that amplifies the risk of burnout” (p. 149), and another, to managing perfectionism. Seven basic steps to recovery from burnout are outlined:

1. Identify whether you have burnout (self-test on the *Sydney Burnout Measure* as a tool, for starters, and consult with a health professional).
2. Reflect on possible cause/causes for the burnout.
3. Analyse what might be some beneficial corrective strategies (whether they address work conditions or personality factors).
4. Seek support from a trustworthy person by discussing stressors and the best way for addressing them.
5. Attempt to change what you see as work stressors.



“in response to the pandemic. The content of this very readable book [is] ... especially helpful for jaded teachers, school administrators and the parents of school children.”

6. Consider whether you are displaying perfectionist traits, and if so, how to modulate them.
7. Identify and change daily habits that may be producing stress, by prioritising which responsibilities to disconnect from. "The moral here: if you don't turn electronic devices off, you can't turn yourself off" (p. 218). (Adapted from pp. 217-218)

Since burnout is considered a stress-induced state, the authors suggest an eighth step of trialling several individual de-stressing strategies such as exercise (attending to your body); meditation (feeding your soul); and practising mindfulness, engaging (or coming to) your senses.

In setting the scene for the book, the personal experiences of three well-recognised people, able to recover from burnout by reworking the patterns of their lives, are chronicled, sharing insight and practical wisdom. The most helpful strategies, detailed by participants in the research undertaken by the authors, are collated, contributing to a

broad-based management approach for both recognising and treating, in a tailored way, symptoms of burnout. This book is timely, for understanding mental health issues facing our society in a post-COVID world. [TEACH](#)

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“the personal experiences of three well-recognised people, able to recover from burnout by reworking the patterns of their lives, are chronicled,”



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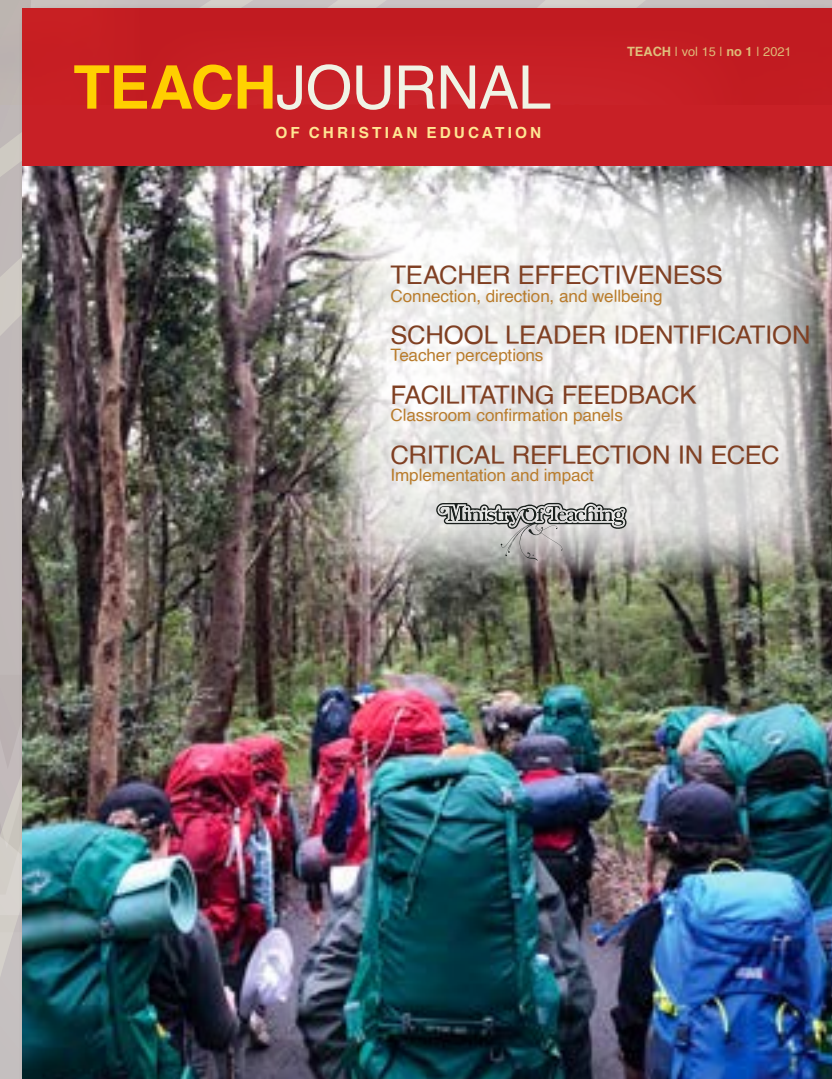
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