APPLYING AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION – ONE SCHOOL'S EXPERIENCE

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Christian school habitually find difficulty in their presentation of their faith position to students. In their eagerness for students to embrace Christian faith, some teachers are inclined to adopt a methodology which is overly didactic and which creates boredom and resentment. This case study reports on an action research approach in one school. It examines how a change in teaching methodology has led to improved student attitudes to Christian faith. The data from the action research has been used to reposition the school's stance towards a more authentic pedagogy and less strident model. Initial evaluations have been encouraging.

Keywords: autonomy, cognitive space, didacticism, evangelism, indoctrination, staff development, worldview

INTRODUCTION

Christian schools by their very nature tend to be staffed by teachers who are keen for their students to embrace the Christian gospel. In their enthusiasm for this outcome, however, it is possible for some teachers to forget that their primary function is as educators and, in doing so, ardently advocate their own belief systems rather than assist students to explore and develop their own belief systems. A highly didactic method of evangelism may result both in poor pedagogy and ineffective advocacy of Christian belief.

Christian schools position themselves at various points with respect to the issue of evangelism. Some schools take a more aggressive approach, while others prefer a more ambassadorial approach. Moreover, within individual schools, there can be a wide divergence of views with respect to what represents an effective model of faith encouragement.

This paper is based on some underlying general assumptions about the nature of Christian Education — particularly with respect to the relationship between education and evangelism. These assumptions are:

1. Even in a Christian school teachers are paid to educate first and evangelise second. This order of priorities arises because the relationship between the school and the parent is framed primarily in educational terms i.e., parents send their children to a Christian school primarily to be educated — certainly within a certain ethos, but to be educated nevertheless.

2. Education and evangelism are, however, not necessarily mutually contradictory aims or activities if evangelism is defined and conducted in educational terms i.e., no contradiction necessarily exists if faith development occurs in the context of an active and open engagement with faith-related ideas drawn from a variety of sources and presented through authentic educational activities and experiences.

3. However, education and evangelism are mutually contradictory aims if evangelism implies "shutting down" debate, insulating students from engagement with the world, or forcing the gospel on students rather than gently inviting students to consider the gospel and particular aspects of it.

4. Anecdotally, a difficulty for some Christian teachers and schools is that their understanding and practice of evangelism is more closed than open. As a result, these Christian teachers can come into conflict with their students, their students' parents, and with colleagues who have different ideas of what evangelism entails than they do. Moreover these teachers may falsely attribute

conflicts relating to their understanding of evangelism to 'spiritual warfare' rather than to genuine differences of opinion concerning what evangelism means in educational contexts — perhaps especially educational contexts serving students and parents from non-Christian backgrounds. What some of these students need in the first instance is not 'altar-call' appeals for conversion, but pre-evangelistic conceptual development and world-view formative discussion.

INVESTIGATING THE SCHOOL'S MODEL OF EVANGELISM

The research reported in this paper comprises a longitudinal case study, and an associated intervention, investigating the limitations of recent practice to produce desired student outcomes in one Christian educational context. The study particularly explores students' negative reactions to a strongly didactic model of Christian education. In contrast, the study also provides evidence that in order to develop a faith of their own students require cognitive and emotional 'space' in order to explore their developing understandings of faith and sense of themselves as faithful individuals. In particular, pedagogies that allow for controversy and dissent, that attempt to extend students' horizons in a extensive exploration of reality, and that are respectful of divergent views were seen by students to be much more productive than approaches that were perceived by students to be intolerant of diverse opinions and perspectives, or that attempted to confine, limit and otherwise proscribe debate, discussion and an open exploration of the world and views of the world.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

By observation, at least some Christian schools are staffed by a proportion of teachers who lack

the ability to enter the thought-worlds or relate to the concerns of students less enamoured of the teachers' faith position than the teachers themselves. Often, such teachers display a naïve confidence that simply asserting their faith position will be enough to persuade students to embrace it (Macnaught, 1995). Moreover, some schools assume that simply staffing schools with people of faith will lead to demonstrable faith-outcomes from Christian education (such as the adoption of the Christian faith by students), with little of no purposeful activity or planned structures put in place to effect such outcomes.

One of the reasons why such difficulties persist is that clear alternative models of Christian Education have not been widely articulated. In order to rectify this perceived deficit, this paper reports the results of targeted action research investigating one school's attempt to implement an alternative model of Christian Education, based on an understanding that faith issues need to be explored in an open and meaningful way by students with the assistance of staff who are willing and able to facilitate and engage in such explorations.

CONTEXT
1. School Setting
The school involved in the study is an open, inclusive and interdenominational Christian school of 1350 students located in the western suburbs of Sydney, Australia. It seeks to follow a model of Christian Education based on enculturation and exploration rather than indoctrination and exploitation. While the school has no religious tests of entry for students, and indeed accepts those of any or no faith, it expects its staff to be active members of a Christian faith community. The school is evangelistic in intent, seeking that students

should know Him in whom dwells all the fullness of God (Colossians 1:19). Having a majority of non-Christian parents and students in the school is, however, somewhat problematic for this intent. Issues arising include the extent to which non-Christian parents will support or even tolerate an evangelistic outreach to their children, especially if this outreach is contrary or irrelevant to their understanding of a school's role and purpose.

In addition, even where this evangelistic intent is supported and possible to realise in practice, it is nevertheless easier in conception than delivery. Immediately, critical questions arise. Questions relating to curriculum include: What is to be the school's model for the enculturation of faith? How will this model (once defined) be made to actively engage and satisfy post-modern teenagers? Questions relating to staff include: How will staff be equipped to teach from a Christian worldview without this worldview becoming artificial or contrived, and without undermining the intellectual rigour of the disciplines they teach? To what extent will staff allow the processes of faith enquiry to be genuinely educational, making room for doubt and dissent? (Teachers, zealous for the Gospel to take root in the hearts of their students, can forget that their primary role as educators is to expand horizons, not to adopt a reductionist position that aims to indoctrinate students into their beliefs.) Will denominational diversity amongst staff cause disagreement about the purposes, processes and philosophy of Christian Education? Can unity around an essential core of beliefs be maintained between those who adhere to different expressions of faith?

Somewhat more widely, questions may be asked of the school community: Will the minority of actively involved Christian parents tolerate a

Christian school being so open about questions of faith as to allow dissent and unbelief amongst students, or will some parents, perhaps of more fundamentalist persuasion, seek the sureties of withdrawal into an unquestioning faith-based community offering a more restrictive model of Christian schooling? Finally, questions can be asked of the school itself: Will the school have the confidence to continue to interrogate its own model of Christian schooling and education? Is the school tacitly preparing students to enter and maintain particular church cultures, or to freely participate anywhere across the full spectrum of Christian faith organisations and activities? Is the school teaching a faith which is clearly the 'main' business of the school, and so is likely to be maintained by students in their post-school years? (Cooling, 1997). Is the school simply promoting religion as a means of maintaining a social status quo, or as a means of affecting compassionate social change?

2. SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY AND CURRICULUM

The school's philosophy is that faith will be visible through the whole range of its activities. Inherent in this philosophy is an integrated view of the development of Christian faith. In terms of their stated aims, some Christian schools appear content with a very shallow penetration of Christian education teachings into the school curriculum, confining these teachings to distinctively 'religious' parts of the school structures (such as Chapel), whilst allowing a predominantly secular curricula to continue largely untroubled by religious considerations. In contrast, the present school aspires to integrate Christian understandings throughout the whole curriculum. Teachers are expected to link a Christian worldview to their academic disciplines, and to critique the worldviews that

emerge from secular (and Christian) textbooks and syllabus documents. Such an approach aims to be transforming and renewing (Romans 12:1-2), equipping students to escape unquestioning compliance with cultural norms. Moreover, the cognitive aspects of curriculum taught from a Christian standpoint are supported and complemented by the Christian love shown by staff in their pastoral dealings with students. Thus, both the cognitive and affective elements of the Christian educational program of the school are designed to present a seamless commendation of the Christian message. In short, the ultimate goal is diligent, caring teachers providing quality learning experiences, and thus providing winsome examples of faith.

The school's curriculum aims to be broad in scope and content and, in the best sense, 'liberal' - drawing on knowledge from all sources that that can be labelled 'true, noble, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy' (Philippians 4:6-8). Such a stance challenges sacred/secular dichotomies, wherein only subject matter which is principally about faith is regarded as sacred, and the rest of the 'worldly' curriculum is regarded as secular. Consistent with this stance, all subject matter is regarded as part of God's world, fallen certainly but still created by God, and therefore sacred: 'For everything God created is good' (1 Timothy 4:4).

RESEARCH

Three interrelated studies comprised the present research program.

Study 1

Purpose

The purpose of Study 1 was to ascertain senior students' perceptions regarding the nature of the curriculum to which they had been exposed during their schooling. In particular, the

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perceived indoctrinative nature (or otherwise) of the curriculum was explored.

Participants

The first study elicited responses from Prefects, in a focus group conducted one term before completion of their matriculation studies. The Prefect group comprised twelve (12) students with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. As student leaders in their final stage (Year 12) of secondary schooling, these students were considered to be able to reflect helpfully on the efficacy of Christian education approaches to which they had been exposed during their six years of experience.

Procedures

Open ended, free response oral questions were put to the group to ascertain their responses to aspects of the school's Christian Education program. In particular, questions focussed on Biblical Studies (called 'Christian Living') classes and fortnightly Chapel. Questions elicited responses concerning the extent to which students felt specific aspects of the program were forced, indoctrinative or manipulative. Field notes were taken during a 40-minute discussion and amplified later. The data were later content analysed and categorised into key themes based on the operational categories emerging from the data.

Results

The key themes emerging from the data were hostility, boredom, and the quashing of dissent. The dominant theme in students' responses was hostility, accompanied by a sense of being demeaned by the forceful nature of the presentation of Christian faith by some staff. Interestingly, objections were more about the forceful manner in which content was presented than about any particular aspect of the content

as such. Moreover, both Christian and non-Christian students were highly critical of the approach taken in the programs, the former because they saw these methods as being more-or-less totally ineffective in bringing the latter to faith.

Students were also critical of the repetitious pedagogical structure and teaching methodologies of Christian Living lessons, which led to a palpable sense of boredom in, and with, the lessons. Students commenting on Chapel decried the lack of participation allowed, the similarity in style and background of presenters, and the stultifying, alienating effect of being constantly 'subjected' to the 'gospel' over many years, with little variation or development of key gospel themes over time.

Finally, students' critique of Christian Living classes reacted strongly against the stridency of teacher opinions, often put ardently and didactically with little opportunity for discussion, debate or dissent. The quashing of dissent also had negative impacts on students' cognitive processing and emotional acceptance of the material presented. Some found teachers' views too extreme to be compelling, some found demands on students to state their personal faith stance to be an invasion of privacy, and others found the teaching (however forceful) to be too theoretical and unapplied to be of relevance to their lives.

Study 2

Purpose and Participants

Following the trenchant critique of the school's Christian Education program by the participants in Study 1, it was decided to survey all 120 Year 12 students the following year, to ascertain whether the views expressed in Study 1 were widely shared amongst the new senior cohort.

Procedures
A structured questionnaire was developed for Study 2, with students being invited to respond to four questions. These questions elicited responses concerning: (a) the best and worst features of the school's program (two separate questions), (b) students' advice on Christian Education within the school and, (c) open-ended comments about the school's Christian Education program.

Analyses
The open-ended nature of the questionnaire meant that students were able to choose to answer any or all of the stated questions. As a result, not all students chose to answer all questions in the survey. Student responses that were provided (in the form of short written answers to the questions) were transcribed and collated in a qualitative data matrix. These data were then grouped according to apparent content themes emerging from the data. These content themes provided an embedded categorisation for the data, with the number of responses in each category used to provide an overview of trends in student responses.

Once constructed, the categorised data matrix was interrogated to identify:
1. response categories that were most heavily weighted by students; and
2. data rich responses (i.e., typically longer responses, but also those responses that identified particularly salient – and often latent – features of the Christian Education program).

Results
1. Best features of the program.
Students' responses (with the number of responses comprising each category reported in brackets after each category label) to this question related mostly to:

the value of presenting students with different perspectives about religion (9 responses),
the opportunities provided for discussion (8),
pastoral support for students (3),
the diversity of experiences presented through musical and dramatic presentations (3), and
the value of additional optional Bible study and Christian Fellowship groups (3).

Student responses acknowledged that the school's Christian Education program had presented them with information about religion, in a context where some discussion was possible. Some students appreciated the variety in which the material was presented, and the optional extension activities provided.

2. Worst features of the program.
This question produced a larger number of responses than the first question, with some responses being very strongly worded. The most frequent responses were those concerning the:

forced nature of presentations (12),
repetitive structure of lessons (9),
"boring" content of lessons (8),
absence of opportunities for dissent, debate or disagreement (7),
oppressive atmosphere of Christian educational classrooms (5), and
the compulsory place of Christian Education lessons in the curriculum (3).

The most cited comment complained about religion being 'forced down [students'] throats', a comment that clearly reveals the lack of autonomy and volition provided to students in the context of Christian Education classes. A particularly perceptive comment by one student was 'a lot of teachers have not thought about religion critically so it is difficult to learn from them'.

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3. Advice on Christian Education programs. The question eliciting students' advice on Christian Education at the school produced more temperate responses, although covering much the same conceptual space as for the previous question. The most frequent advice given was to:

> attempt to be more interesting and relevant (14),
> allow for more debate and discussion (6),
> be less forceful in the presentation of material (5),
> tolerate dissent and disagreement (5), and
> seek skilled external presenters (4).

General comments.
There was a diversity of remarks offered with respect to the 'other comments' component of the survey. However, a clearly emergent theme in student responses was the oppressive, forced and repetitive nature of the teaching methodologies and content of the school's Christian Education program. One insightful summary comment which reflected this perspective was: 'many people leave this school not convinced about Christianity, but sick of hearing about it'.

Summary
Overall, Studies 1 and 2 using two different samples (Prefects and all of Year 12) and two different methodologies (Focus Group and Open-Ended Questionnaire) provided general agreement, from both Christian and non-Christian students, that the Christian Education program followed at the school was, at best, largely ineffective and, at worst, counter-productive. In particular, opposition to the Christian message was apparently being generated by the forceful, repetitive nature of its presentation. Thus, there was a strong consensus that students had effectively been counter-evangelised by the school's Christian Education program.

Study 3
The results Studies 1 and 2 indicated that the school's Christian Education program was, for large numbers of students, not functioning as an effective program of either instruction or evangelism. In order to rectify perceived deficits in the program, the school developed a sequence of staff development initiatives and interventions designed to improve the quality of the School's Christian Education programs. Specifically:

1. staff were trained to maintain student goodwill towards the Christian message such that those students departing at the end of Year 12 remained open to, if not yet convinced by, the Christian message.

2. staff were trained to provide cognitive space and metacognitive support to students in order to enable students to incorporate new perspectives into their views of reality. In the context of 'space' and 'support', debate, discussion and dissent were reconceptualised as processes necessary and helpful to the growth and development of faith, rather than as processes antithetical to faith development. Moreover, superficial, formulaic answers to complex issues and questions concerning faith were discouraged.

3. major conferences and staff retreats were organised in order to provide staff with extensive opportunities to reflect on their teaching philosophy and practices in the light of input from external speakers and presenters.

4. a new school-designed staff induction course was introduced so that new staff would understand the school's pedagogical faith model from the beginning of their tenure. This course includes discussion based around prior readings, and resource and information sessions that indicated how Christian

education can best proceed in the context of particular disciplines.

5. a formal school-university partnership was formed so that teachers could study accredited courses in Christian Education taught on-site by university staff. These courses encouraged staff to explore issues of Christian education relevant to a school setting and to contemporary youth.

In addition to the above staff development initiatives, the school also committed to several important curriculum initiatives. The Christian Living curriculum, which according to the previous studies was problematic, was substantially reworked in order develop a clear sequence of study within the curriculum. This sequence provides for access to a greater variety of material, particularly material that engages popular culture and thus is more specifically targeted at the interests of teenagers. Moreover, teachers for the Christian Living classes have been selected on their ability both to teach effectively and to establish positive rapport with their students.

Finally, the school established a Christian Perspectives Committee, charged with the task of establishing benchmarks for course development in Christian Education. The Committee visited and hosted other schools in order to explore the features of good practice Christian education programs. The Committee also took advice from a core group of key stakeholders that formally audited the efficacy of the school's Christian Education programs on an annual basis.

Evaluation
The effectiveness of the intervention described above was evaluated in a survey which again sought students' perspectives concerning the interest and relevance of the school's Christian Education program.

Participants
All 130 Year 12 students were asked to respond in writing to a series of short answer questions that were essentially identical to those asked in the 1999 survey. Surveys were completed in class, collected by teachers and scored.

Procedures
A structured questionnaire asked students to respond to general questions about the main strengths and weaknesses of the school, in response to which some students wrote about aspects of the school's Christian Education program. Further questions asked students to identify whether the school's programs had led to a change in their view of the Christian faith, and whether they felt pressured to adopt Christian belief.

Analyses
Student responses provided in short written answers to the questions were transcribed and collated in a qualitative data matrix, which were then grouped according to themes and categorised. The categorised data matrix was then used to identify high frequency responses as well as those rich in data which commented in helpful detail on aspects of the program.

Results
The result was tested by re-administration of the survey to the 2005 Year 12 cohort. Of 99 respondents, 10 in the free response category listed the school's Christian teaching as the aspect of the school they most valued. Against this, asked to cite the worst features of the school, one listed Chapel, two listed the school's religious programs and one identified pressure to convert to Christianity. The survey found that

opposition to the school's presentation of its Christian message had fallen from 70% of Year 12 (1999) to 30% (2004). This was interpreted as quite minimal opposition, particularly in the light of 1998 and 1999 survey results.

DISCUSSION

The comments by Year 12 students in Studies 1 & 2 consistently expressed resentment at the stridency with which some staff attempted to represent their Christian belief to students. Moreover, some teachers in their zeal to see students come to personal faith placed undue pressure on students, becoming overly forceful in the presentation of their Christian beliefs. The use of excessive force, however, produced exactly the opposite effect of that intended i.e., students were repelled from Christianity rather than drawn to it. This tended to confirm the findings in the literature (Hill, 2001; Cooling, 1994a). Considerable concern, however, did arise amongst the school's teaching staff in response to the very strong reactions against the perceived stridently didactic approach to Christian education expressed in Studies 1 and 2.

Operationally, some staff appeared to compromise the integrity of the educational processes in which they were agents, in order to focus on faith-adoption by students. Thus, some teachers apparently saw their role as evangelist first and educator second. This role definition effectively challenged the fragile enrolment 'contract' between the school and the many largely unchurched parents choosing the school for reasons other than a desire to see their child 'converted'. Moreover, the mix of ardent Christian staff with parents and students who did not share this ardour was volatile, threatening the relational equilibrium of this school.

The differing perceptions of parents, students and staff as to the location and method of evangelism implicated the clear need for a proper re-conceptualisation of evangelism in educational terms, followed by staff training indicating that an overly forceful approach to evangelism impeded staff and students' relationships with each other. Further, these forceful approaches potentially led some staff to misinterpret student responses i.e., what appeared to be rejection of the Gospel was typically a rejection not of the Gospel but of strident methods of gospel presentation.

In response to the data provided by the first two studies, the school attempted to recast its Christian Education programs in genuinely educative terms. This required considerable attention to staff training (Thompson, 2003), and a reworking of curriculum. An initial evaluation of this initiative indicated considerably reduced hostility to both the content and the method of presentation of Christian Education within the school. This evaluation reflected improved student-teacher relationships. It appeared to indicate that building bridges to student culture and pre-knowledge was allowing connections to be made (Cooling, 1994b; Harkness 2003). The evaluation supported the literature (Thiessen 1998), in finding that Christian Education which was respectful of persons, had greater efficacy than that which was inherently overpowering in style.

CONCLUSION

Christian Education can tend towards poor pedagogical approaches in the hands of teachers who are convinced strongly by both the correctness of their message and the urgent need of hearers to receive it. This conviction becomes an issue in educational settings if such

teachers translate conviction into unhelpful, non-educative practices. Educative practices require a recognition of the integrity of students' status as individuals growing towards full autonomy. Educative practices also require an open and supportive environment in which students can explore their developing beliefs and ideas as they endeavour to apply faith to a complex world. In this context, formulaic answers and attempts to suppress discussion will be counterproductive; exploration is a necessary part of the faith journey, especially if faith is to be sustained.

Staff from a variety of denominational backgrounds and faith experiences require effective staff development in order to become aware of the challenges of commending faith in a manner which is winsome to a new generation. In particular, staff need to understand not only the thinking patterns of the present generation of school students, but also the ethical issues implicated in their unique position of influence. For such skills to be developed, a purposeful and targeted staff development program will typically be necessary in order to ensure that a school's Christian education program is authentic, ethical and pedagogically sound. A targeted action research approach in one school has shown that helpful progress can be made towards a less confrontational, more pedagogically sound

method of evangelism which, in being less antagonistic, is more likely to be effective.

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