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## The Assessment of Faith and Learning

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## **WORKING PAPER SERIES**

### **The Assessment of Faith and Learning**

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The University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform (EDRE) working paper series is intended to widely disseminate and make easily accessible the results of EDRE faculty and students' latest findings. The Working Papers in this series have not undergone peer review or been edited by the University of Arkansas. The working papers are widely available, to encourage discussion and input from the research community before publication in a formal, peer reviewed journal. Unless otherwise indicated, working papers can be cited without permission of the author so long as the source is clearly referred to as an EDRE working paper.

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## **Abstract**

The Practicing Faith Survey (PFS) is a new assessment tool designed to measure the extent to which schoolchildren connect their faith to learning. This paper reviews the landscape of educational assessment and argues that assessment remains a critical element in the design of Christian teaching and learning. It suggests that unease around the concept of educational measurement leads to limited attempts to assess faith formation in the context of learning. The paper discusses PFS as a way to reframe the design process consistent with distinctively Christian practices of teaching and learning.

## The Assessment of Faith and Learning

The Practicing Faith Survey (PFS) is an online assessment tool designed to measure the extent to which students in Christian secondary schools connect their faith to learning. PFS offers students individual and confidential, formative feedback on their investment in practices of Christian formation. The school receives aggregate data which they may use to review the relationship between their educational practices and Christian formation. This paper positions PFS in relationship to existing approaches to educational assessment and discusses the distinctive elements of the survey. Other papers unpack the conceptual dimension of the project (Smith et al., 2019) and the design and validation of the survey (Cheng et al., 2019).

### **To what or to whom are we accountable?**

Assessment has always been a critical part of the learning loop; it is also a mechanism of institutional cultural change. By measuring things, we ensure that people devote attention to them. Practices of assessment are driven by the desire to find something out. Christian teachers and Christian learners are situated in rapidly changing cultural contexts and far more people are asking about what they know and can do.

Like all sets of practices, assessment is not a neutral activity. It matters a great deal who is asking the questions and their motivations. Practices of whole school assessment are themselves embedded in a set of policy and professional norms. Drawing on Wenger's (2000) description of how practices shape learning in professional communities, we might say that a whole set of assumptions around purpose, process and successful educational outcomes have been reified in the experience of whole school assessment. Ball (1994) and Thrupp (2003) critique this in the context of education reform in the United Kingdom. They argue that practices of data collection, inspection rubrics, accreditation of teachers, the local management of schools, centralised curriculum and examination grades have stripped teachers and learners of educational autonomy. They are not arguing that the practice of education should proceed without evidence, accountability, teacher education and

curriculum, rather they are arguing that the vision of education which drives these practices is reductionist. They would describe this vision as ‘neo-liberal’. A neo-liberal imagination embraces a particular vision of the small state, public private partnerships for the delivery of government services and free-market capitalism. Conversely, proponents of the practices Ball and Thrupp critique, such as Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) or Chubb and Moe (2000), see whole school assessment as a means to improving the quality of education for all and making it more responsive to individual student and community needs. No doubt this debate will continue and much of it is beyond the bounds of this paper. It is important for our purposes to note that Christian schools and Christians who teach and learn in schools find themselves part of this contested terrain. The number of groups with a stake in education has expanded far beyond student, teacher, parent and administration. Today in the design of curriculum, pastoral care and institutional processes, attention must also be paid to the voices of accreditation, higher education, educational associations, government, future employers, community leaders and multiple faith groups.

As Christian educators sort through all of these expectations and attempt to listen well to these voices it seems that the central task of teaching and learning rapidly recedes from view. This is particularly evident in the literature which we review in the following section. We follow Collier and Dowson (2007) and others (Grace, 2002 & Cooling 2016) who argue that the primary function of the Christian school is education not evangelism, when evangelism is understood narrowly as uncritical transmission or induction of students into the religious faith of their teachers.<sup>1</sup> The assumption in this paper is that assessment, including whole school assessment and the assessment of faith formation in a school context, is primarily a teaching and learning task. We assume that teaching and learning and

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<sup>1</sup> Collier and Dowson (2007) set out four clarifying assumptions about the relationship of education to evangelism. 1. Parents send their children to Christian schools to be educated, within a certain ethos, but the task of education is primary; 2. Education and evangelism are not necessarily mutually contradictory aims or activities if faith development is presented through authentic educational activities and experiences; 3. Education and evangelism are contradictory if evangelism implies shutting down debate and engagement with the world and 4. Distinguishing between closed and open forms of evangelism in educational contexts. (p.28).

assessment should be driven by a distinctively Christian imagination for education. Cooling & Smith (2019) define this as follows: ‘Our task as Christian teachers is to find ways of teaching that are genuinely consistent with our Christian faith and genuinely helpful to students educationally’. The goal of the Practicing Faith and Assessment Survey is to reframe whole school assessment in a way that restores the central task of Christian teaching and learning orientated towards faith formation.

This paper proceeds in two parts to sort through these competing contexts and discuss the potential of the Practicing Faith Survey to reframe educational assessment in ways that enhance the faith formation of learners.

### **Review of the assessment landscape.**

The first part of this paper will review the landscape of educational assessment in relation to faith formation and vocation which we understand to be a distinctive component of Christian teaching and learning. Please note that the paper offered in the symposium by Dr. David Smith will unpack the concepts of formation and vocation in relation to the domains of learning which underpin the survey tool. The purpose of the literature review in this paper is to begin to sort out the competing drivers of educational assessment and some of the associated practices or tools typically used by Christian schools in North America. In this section we will consider the legitimate concerns that some of the practices associated with these assessment approaches raise for the Christian school context.

The first thing to note is that the research literature related to the assessment of faith formation in Christian schools is very sparse. We extended the parameters of our peer-reviewed literature search to include empirical and theoretical discussions, to include all faith-based schools, anything related to school climate and school culture and we extended the search beyond North America to include the international literature. This resulted in only 18 articles that were mostly on point and a further nine which were minimally related. Many of these authors conclude that taking account of the distinctive mission of faith-based schools is mostly absent from the literature on

assessing school effectiveness and climate. Van der Walt & Zecha (2004) did not find any studies “that were concerned with the effectiveness of Christian schools” (p. 169) nor could they find any models for “assessing the effectiveness of Christian schools” (p. 174).

Pollock (2013) carried out research into perceptions of school success in a publicly funded separate Catholic school in the Canadian province of Ontario. She observes that even in contexts where Christian schools are funded as part of the public system, little work has been done to consider their particular religious identity and its implications for the nature of academics and faith formation. She is levelling this critique both at the research field and at the policy level. Pollock (2013) notes that evaluating school effectiveness has become synonymous with performance on provincial and national standardised state testing. Ball (2007) would concur that this has become a norm in most majority world education systems. We suggest that the absence of attempts to take account of the distinctively Christian mission of schools in processes of assessment means that other practices of evaluating school effectiveness and climate have become normalised. In some cases, these mechanisms may simply neglect faith formation as a goal but it is likely that in many cases the driving assumptions associated with standardised testing actively undermine it. Maney *et al's* (2017) study of teacher student relationships in a group of American Catholic middle and high school sheds some interesting light on the consequences of this for a Catholic school system in the mid-West.

Maney *et al.* (2017) argue that Catholic mission and identity was missing from the practices of whole school evaluation. In particular, they state that ‘faculty-student relationships are rarely measured regarding their effectiveness in bolstering academic achievement or Catholic mission effectiveness;’ (p.36). Their qualitative investigation focused on the quality of teacher student relationships for forming culture. They administered independent questionnaires ‘WE TEACH WE LEARN’ developed by the *Successful Practices Network* (SPN, 2019). These questionnaires are designed to measure the consistency between teacher and student responses to questions

about the school's rigor, relevance, relationships, and school leadership. They added questions on Catholic instructional practices to the survey and ran focus groups with parents.

Maney et al. (2017) uncovered some interesting gaps between teacher and student perceptions of relationships in school. It is perhaps not surprising to learn that teachers tended to rate items attesting to the presence of a stronger relationship more highly than students. It is the ratings in relation to faith formation that are of particular interest. Testing showed a significant difference 'with students more often endorsing items about their own perceptions of the importance of faith formation than teachers' (p.47). This suggests that faith formation, as a dimension of the quality of relationship, was of higher importance to students than it was for teachers. In focus groups the researchers also found that for parents, faith formation was a higher priority than academics. Other research confirms that faith formation is a significant priority for parents who choose faith-based schools and that it is consistently under-rated as an educational priority by those who carry out research in this field (Green, 2018). This is a small study and the results are not generalisable, there's a lot more we need to know about the explanation for this finding. It is reasonable to hypothesise that the discrepancy between the priority that parents and students give to faith-formation compared to that of teachers might be partially to do with the professional and sector norms within which teachers have been socialised. If teachers mainly experience processes of whole school assessment which neglect faith formation, then they are unlikely to make it a priority as part of teaching and learning.

We found similar conversations taking place within other Christian denominations represented in the literature. Mizelle (2009) for example explores school climate within the context of Lutheran schooling in America and offers the 'Lutheran school climate inventory' as a tool for Lutheran principals. This survey is administered to students and collects diagnostic information regarding the academic environment, physical environment, social environment, and affective

environment of the school. In this it is typical of most of the diagnostic survey tools we found referenced in the literature and which we suspect are used when Christian schools embark on a process of whole school assessment. The Practising Faith Survey is markedly different from these tools since it is a measure of the faith formation of students as an outcome of teaching and learning and we will return to this distinction in part two of the paper.

Bradfield (2014) has developed the *Growing Disciples Inventory* (GDI) for use in Seventh Day Adventist schools because she found ‘no assessment of holistic goals for Christian spiritual development in the context of Protestant private schools in America (p. 130). The goal of the GDI is to provide individual formative assessment to students in relation to the curriculum goals of Seventh Day Adventist schools. These goals can be summarised under the headings ‘connecting’, ‘understanding’, ‘ministering’ and ‘equipping’ which aim to help students grow in their relationship with God, self and others (p. 133). The GDI has been through a successful validation process but Bradfield (2014) recommended wider testing with a larger interdenominational sample. We haven’t found any published discussion of how this assessment tool is impacting teaching and learning in Seventh Day Adventist schools and we do hope that such research is forthcoming. This instrument is the closest to the Practising Faith Survey that we have found in the literature. Like the PFS it is based on a holistic view of spiritual development, its survey items promote student self-reflection and summative group reports can be generated for use by schools. Unlike the PFS however the survey items do not appear to connect directly to practices of teaching and learning in the classroom. It is also not intended to function as a tool for Christian school evaluation which is an intended outcome of the Practising Faith Survey.

The literature does introduce us to a number of sector wide surveys which measure the influence of Christian schooling on religious belief, behaviours and spiritual formation. There are undoubtedly other survey measures being used by schools but we are limiting this review to the peer-reviewed literature. Two of the most well-known, independently validated and publicly reported

measures would be the attitudinal scales developed by Leslie Francis (1979) and the Cardus Education Survey (Sikkink, 2012 and Neven Van Pelt *et al* 2012). Francis has measured the contribution of schools to students' religious, personal and social values in England and Wales over the last 30 years and his research constitutes an impressive body of peer reviewed material (see for example Village and Francis, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

The Cardus Education Survey (CES) is a school sector cross-sectional study of the impact of school sector on graduate outcomes. Nationally representative samples of graduates from public, independent non-religious schools and independent religious schools in the U.S. and Canada are surveyed. Neither CES or Francis's measure collects data on the teaching and learning approaches undertaken in the classrooms and they do not provide individual student feedback on faith formation in relation to student vocation. It is quite possible that institutions draw on the Francis and CES studies when they have conversations about whole school evaluation and the impact of mission but we are not aware of any published literature that reviews this directly in relation to the institutional assessment of faith formation in schools. It should be noted that the Practicing Faith Survey is a deliberate attempt to build on the CES survey and develop a measure more suited to assessing teaching and learning and faith formation at an institutional level.<sup>3</sup>

### **Discussion of the Practicing Faith Survey**

The second part of this paper discusses the Practicing Faith Survey as a means to reframing the educational assessment conversation in K-12 Christian schooling. Please note that the design and validation of the survey will be presented by Dr. Albert Cheng in his symposium paper. The purpose of this paper is to put the distinctively Christian assumptions of PFS into conversation with the

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<sup>2</sup> This is a large body of work and a few of the more recent examples are cited here as an example.

<sup>3</sup>Cardus piloted an institutional version of its Cardus Education Survey with Christian schools in Alberta, Canada. The results are for internal school use only and there is not currently a published study discussing findings.

broader trends in educational assessment. We propose that the following areas of focus in the PFS are really important in order to reframe assessment:

- (a) A focus on faith-informed practices as a form of faith understanding.
- (b) A focus on practices that are part of the life of the student (and teacher) within the processes of school-based education.
- (c) A focus on suggesting growth vectors for students (and teachers).
- (d) The need for a more sustainable economic and delivery model.
- (e) A focus on engaging students and teachers as more immediate participants and beneficiaries of the process.

For the purposes of discussion in this paper we have grouped these focus areas under three headings:

i) practices, ii) growth models and iii) teacher and student engagement.

The focus in PFS on practices is intentional and stands in contrast to a focus on beliefs and behaviours. A particular philosophy of teaching and learning drives practice-based approaches. This philosophical approach assumes that the student and teacher collaborate to construct knowledge; we can describe this as a constructivist pedagogy. In contrast standardised assessment testing, accreditation and inspection processes can be described as a transmission pedagogy in which it is assumed that it is the role of the teacher to pass on right belief and knowledge to the student. Cooling (2016) deals elsewhere with the objections many Christian educators rightly raise to radical constructivist pedagogies because they are based on the assumption that all knowledge and truth claims are relative. PFS does not adopt a radical constructivist position, rather it takes a critical realist position which assumes that truth is real and knowable, but that it is always mediated by context. Cooling (2016) argues that positivist assumptions imported into Christian education via transmission pedagogies are the bigger threat. One of the ways they have been imported is via the methodologies of standardised assessment testing, surveys of religious belief and behaviour and, school climate measures which drive whole school assessment in the sector.

Smith develops in his symposium paper an argument about the faith-informed practices of learning that students may experience in the classroom. Here it is important to note how focussing on practices might work to drive whole school assessment differently and there are a couple of features to highlight. First, a focus on practices rehabilitates regard for the influence of teaching and learning in the formation of faith. A focus on beliefs and behaviours has led sociologists of education to unfairly disregard the school as a site of influence on educational outcomes in favour of socio-economic explanatory factors (Green, 2018). Similarly, a focus on beliefs and behaviours appears to contribute to the sense within the Christian community that church or family, rather than school, is the primary site for the transmission of faith. Research by Barna group (2019) demonstrates that not only do the majority of Protestant pastors and Catholic priests in the US believe this but they also regard school as one of the most negative factors influencing faith formation.<sup>4</sup>

Focussing on practices better reflects the fact that we are learning all the time and constantly receiving messages about what to prioritise in relation to learning and faith. In her doctoral research Green (2009) found that restricting religious learning to particular institutional spaces and curriculum content may foster religious literacy but it also reinforces the idea that religious faith is a private matter and irrelevant to the whole of life and learning. This leads us to a second feature of note which is that a focus on practice may foster a holistic approach where the teaching and learning students engage with is regarded as formative for faithful relationships across the domains of learning and not just significant for the transmission of knowledge.

The educational market is a driver and a constraint for Christian education in North America. Partial funding is available for Christian schools in some Canadian provinces but keeping tuition affordable for parents restricts budgets. Some schools in the US and Canada are still directly attached

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that in both Canada and the USA a majority of students graduate from the public school sector so it is likely that survey participants are referring to 'public school' as having a negative influence on faith formation. The survey did not find that a majority of pastors and priests were recommending Christian schools in the light of this, rather they regarded it as a private matter for parents.

to church communities, but it is rarely the case today that enrolment in the school is a condition of membership in the community; in reality Christian schools compete in a complex educational marketplace. At a practical level this makes purchasing assessment tools above and beyond the evaluation process mandated by state or provincial governments too expensive for some schools to consider. Many survey tools operate with a large, stand-alone fee for static data collection, processing and reporting. If schools want to repeat the measure costs will be incurred all over again. We are developing an innovative funding model for the PFS, this is in the planning stage and full details are not available at the time of writing. We hope PFS will be affordable, and repeatable, with flexible pricing and small unit costs per student comparable to the price of a text book. This is important in order to deal with the practical barriers of cost but it also addresses the conceptual problem of collecting static descriptive data, rather than providing a model of growth.

A practice based pedagogy assumes that learning is not orientated to a fixed point when mastery of knowledge will be accomplished, but rather is orientated towards growth and deeper reflective engagement with knowledge. This is very significant theologically because it reshapes the purpose of faith-formation towards growth and deeper engagement with the kingdom of God rather than towards salvation when this is understood to be a fixed point demarcating whether someone is 'in' or 'outside' of the kingdom. PFS works out of a robust theology of common grace, in which it is understood that everyone can benefit from distinctively Christian practices of faith-formation that bless a whole community and allow it to flourish (Bretherton, 2006). Christian schools struggle to break free from economic drivers that undermine their distinctive mission and purpose. The focus of PFS on practices and on growth is one way schools can begin to step aside from these constraints.

Finally, PFS engages teachers and students in the assessment process quite differently from the way this is typically done. Teachers and students typically experience data collection as punitive and this erodes their confidence in the necessary feedback loop of accountability, assessment and critical reflection. One of the reasons that this happens is because teachers and students are often

passive recipients of data collection, often they do not see survey results or participate fully in the analysis undertaken by senior administration or researchers. PFS will provide individual feedback to students who will be directed to follow up resources written intentionally for the high school age-range; this individual feedback will not be shared with anyone else. Teachers will receive aggregated, anonymised results and feedback; they in turn will be directed to a suite of teaching and learning resources to promote faith-informed pedagogy. You may be familiar with [whatiflearning.com](http://whatiflearning.com) and [teachfastly.com](http://teachfastly.com) these distinctively Christian approaches to teaching and learning illustrate the kind of resources already available to schools who want to work in this way.

### **Conclusion**

This article forms part of a set of three papers which summarise the educational context, the conceptual framework and the design and validation process for the PFS (Cheng et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). In this paper we have argued that there is an urgent need for Christian schools to evaluate student faith formation as a practice of teaching and learning. We have suggested that when evaluation is focused on practice, growth models and teacher and student engagement it can counter reductionist approaches to institutional assessment and free up Christian schools to live into their distinctive mission. The literature suggests that there are currently very few research opportunities or empirically validated approaches available for Christian schools wishing to assess the impact of teaching and learning on the faith-formation of students. The literature reviewed also issues an important warning about the extent to which existing forms of institutional assessment may undermine the Christian mission of a school, especially when the underlying philosophical assumptions are not well understood. We offer the PFS as an alternative approach for assessment focused on practice, growth and teaching and learning in the context of distinctively Christian education.

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