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**HASTINGS**  
**CHRISTIAN SCHOOL**

# **PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL**

**Term 3 2019**

An investigation to determine:

- 1) the impact of relationship on student wellbeing and
- 2) the principles that should guide a biblically informed pastoral care programme

## **Acknowledgements**

After nearly 13 years of Principalship, I was delighted to have the opportunity for a period of research, reflection and refreshment. It is, I believe, only achievable when you can remove yourself from the school for an extended period.

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## **Executive Summary**

Healthy relationships within the school environment are critical for students to flourish and achieve their God-given potential. Without a sense of belonging students will be hampered in their academic and personal growth. Schools that foster positive relationships and a sense of connection, greatly increase the likelihood that their students will engage in the learning process.

While more connected than ever, thanks to the widespread use of social media, students are in many respects more isolated than they have ever been. Encouraging students to find a sense of identity through fostering meaningful relationships with other peers and with teachers and teacher aides, goes a long way to ensuring these students thrive.

Healthy relationships at all levels are like the guard rails at the top of the cliff that help to protect and promote student wellbeing. A strong pastoral care programme acts like an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. Such programmes are needed because good relationships can't prevent students from experiencing problems or from needing help to identify and work through them.

Paul Tripp, an educator and biblical counsellor calls for teachers to be 'agents of seeing' in the lives of their students. An agent of seeing helps to bring perspective when a person's radar is off and they see things from a distorted perspective.

Perspective is needed, according to David Powlison, because our default position is to:

1. listen to the wrong voices – both internal and external,
2. measure life using the wrong standard of measure and most tragically of all,
3. look to a wrong saviour – someone to free us from the guilt we experience.

Rather than looking upward to the only real solution provided by our Maker in the person of His Son, we settle for a myriad of other answers to the self-reproach we face. We need real answers and real hope not, as Christian Smith suggests, the moralistic therapeutic deism that so many settle for today.

Smith and his fellow researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill took a close look at the religious beliefs held by American teenagers. They found that the faith held and described by most adolescents came down to something the researchers identified as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."

As described by Smith and his team, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism consists of beliefs like these:

1. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth."
2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."
3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."
4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."
5. "Good people go to heaven when they die."

Albert Mohler in commenting on this said; 'That, in sum, is the creed to which much adolescent faith can be reduced... when it came to the most crucial questions of faith and beliefs, many adolescents responded with a shrug and "whatever."'

In this report I contend that in order to aid student learning and a sense of wellbeing, the fostering of healthy relationships are vital. Further to that, a biblically grounded pastoral care programme is crucial in supporting students to gain perspective with the problems they face and achieve their potential. However, as important as horizontal relationships are to human flourishing, it is their vertical relationship with the one that made them that will benefit them the most - both in time and eternity. That is the relationship that must be relentlessly pursued above all others.

## **Purpose**

How do we support student wellbeing in an increasingly complex world? In particular, what are the elements that make for an effective pastoral care system? That has been the question that has been at the forefront of my mind for some time now. Watching students that are burdened with the 'worries and cares of life' and who struggle to focus academically or thrive personally, has been a driving motivation for my sabbatical research.

## **Background**

The recognition that a failure to address student 'wellbeing' has a clear and direct impact on student achievement, is the topic a growing number of educational articles, blogs and publications. The New Zealand Education Act and the New Zealand Curriculum also stress the importance of addressing student wellbeing:

- Section 77 of the Education Act requires that the principal of a State school "shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that:
  - (a) students get good guidance and counselling; and
  - (b) a student's parents are told of matters that, in the principal's opinion,

(i) are preventing or slowing the student's progress through the school; or  
(ii) are harming the student's relationships with teachers or other students.”

- National Education Goal 2: “Equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders, by identifying and removing barriers to achievement”.
- National Administration Guideline 5(a): “Each Board of Trustees is also required to ... provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students”.
- Key Competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum 2007, especially “managing self” and “relating to others”

Our journey as a school in supporting student wellbeing was aided in 2015 when the staff received training in biblical ‘Peace Making’ and developed a Peace Making procedure. This programme had as its goal to help teachers support students in resolving interpersonal problems as well as to provide strategies that would assist students with relating more positively with each other.

In 2016 the school leadership team made the decision to build on the work done in this area by exploring ways in which the school could better support those students still slipping through the cracks and that needed more targeted help. The result was to introduce a ‘Care Support’ system that involved assigning a mentor who would meet weekly at lunchtime with the student in order to provide, encouragement, accountability and give biblical counsel.

This initiative, similar to a guidance counselling programme, involved referrals from teachers, parents as well as student referrals. It was modelled on the pastoral care programme developed by Brian Morton, a trained biblical counsellor that worked in a large Christian college in Adelaide.

While the feedback from students, parents and staff was overwhelmingly positive, as this programme was largely dependent on using trained volunteers, it was unable to be sustained.

A ‘Peer Support’ programme, where Year 12-13 students met weekly with students from our intermediate, has operated off and on throughout the year since 2016. The goal of this programme was to help younger students (intermediate age) ‘gain perspective’ with their problems by having a senior pupil talk through the issues they were facing. While this had the added benefit of being an encouragement to our senior pupils it was clear that many of the issues that young and older alike were facing needed a deeper level of support.

With a growing roll, the pastoral care issues continued to escalate in number and complexity beyond what the class or form teachers could give adequate attention to. As a result we employed a trained guidance counsellor at the start of this year

While our journey into providing a more targeted form of pastoral care has been tentative, the feedback from students and staff alike has only served to fuel my desire to ensure that we provide the best support we can for those needing help.

The opportunity to represent the New Zealand Association for Christian Schools as an executive member at the 2018 Christian Schools conference in Alice Springs Australia was instrumental in raising my awareness of the impact, importance and influence of the teacher/student relationship on enhancing the learning process.

The findings were compelling. A summary of this research is provided later in this report.

## **Methodology**

As part of my sabbatical investigation I have the opportunity to visit six Christian Schools in Australia and one in the US.

I also had the privilege of attending two Christian School conferences. One in New Zealand and the other in Australia. The first conference was one I attended with all of the teaching staff at our school. The biannual New Zealand Association for Christian Schools, conference was held at Bethlehem College. It was entitled, 'The Way,' and had as its plenary speakers the father and son team of Josh and Dr Sean McDowell. While these men presented much to support teachers in providing real answers to the questions that students face, it was the time spent with the staff that proved most instructive for the theme of my sabbatical research.

The depth of fellowship and camaraderie we enjoyed over the two and a half days served to illustrate the benefits and importance of relationship for students and staff alike.

While in Australia I had hoped to visit Cedar College in Adelaide, while attending the CEN conference, in order to interview the pastoral care coordinator together with the principal Peter Thompson. Despite best laid plans I was unable to visit Cedar College however as I am a personal friend of Brian Morton, the person responsible for setting up the OBC 'Cedar Care' programme, I was able to personally interview him about his understanding of pastoral care.

Part of our time overseas also involved staying with another personal friend, Nigel Shailer, who is responsible for the pastoral care team and counselling programme at a large church in southern California. I spent many hours discussing his philosophy of ministry in regards to counselling. Nigel provided many helpful insights and resources that have been invaluable in forming my understanding of how to best support those, young or old, that struggle gaining perspective when faced with the struggles of life.

## **Findings**

### **1.0 The Impact of Relationship on Student Learning**

#### **1.1 The Dire Situation**

Dr Denise Quinlan, a specialist in individual and organisational wellbeing, said in an article in the New Zealand Principal (September 2017), that the recent upsurge in interest in wellbeing in education is fuelled by two trends. The first, she says is due to the fact that we have an increasing number of students suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. The other trend she contends is that wellbeing aids learning and promotes mental health. She went on to share the sobering finding from the 2017 Pisa and UNICEF reports which identified New Zealand as having the highest level of youth suicide in the OECD and the second highest proportion of students reporting feeling unsafe at school.

One year on from that revelation Anne Giles further confirmed this disturbing truth in an article entitled 'Anxious Kids: A Call to Action' when she shared the following facts:

- 25 percent of children and adolescents suffer from anxiety – it is the number 1 Mental Health issue in New Zealand. 70 000 young New Zealanders are in 'psychological distress' (Listener, Feb 3 201)
- New Zealand has the second highest rate of bullying in the OECD – even thinking about it causes anxiety
- Anxiety comes in spikes and tends to wax and wane
- It can run in families
- Anxious children tend to interpret even safe situations as dangerous and don't usually 'learn from the experience,' even though they come through the perceived trauma or challenge ok – they don't feel better equipped to tackle it next time

## 1.2 The Importance of Relationship

In her article entitled, 'Pupil wellbeing – Teacher wellbeing: Two sides of the same coin?' Sue Roffey made the assertion that there is now a strong body of evidence (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Plagens, 2011) to support the notion that social capital – defined here as expectations and interactions that promote trust, respect, value, and collaboration – impacts significantly on the quality of the learning environment and specifically the wellbeing of both students and staff.

She went on to cite an international literature review carried out for the Australian Federal Government (Noble et al., 2008) which stated:

Student wellbeing is strongly linked to learning. A student's level of wellbeing at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement with learning and their social-emotional behaviour. It is enhanced when evidence-informed practices are adopted by schools in partnership with families and community. Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state, characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimisation and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences. (p.30)

Research on the importance of the quality of teacher student relationships is mushrooming. As an example of this Roffey quotes the work completed by Murray-Harvey (2010) who found that both academic outcomes and social and emotional wellbeing in school were 'unambiguously influenced' by the quality of relationships between teachers and students.

She concludes that schools need to give less prominence to issues of control and more to the skills needed to connect meaningfully with students.

Not only are relationships critical to human flourishing but a right understanding of this world and our place in it is vital if we are to make the most of the time we are given on this earth. Our schools, 'What is and HCS Education' document, puts it this way:

'Teaching is primarily a relational activity; it is about whakawhanaungatanga . The personal rapport between teacher and student is critical. Teachers are continually learning about each student and considering how best to respond to their needs...Our conviction, then, is that schooling that truly meets students' needs puts the things of life – the knowledge, skills, values, competencies – in the context of God's narrative. An education of this kind is indispensable and a vital tool for instilling enduring hope and purpose in our youth.'

### 1.3 Relational Schools Research

During my earlier visit to Australia I had the privilege of hearing Dr Robert Lowe, the executive director of Relational Schools UK share the findings from a study commissioned by Christian Schools Australia (CSA) that looked at the influence of relationship on the learning process. Dr Lowe stated;

'We know that relationships matter. We know from decades of research from institutions like Harvard or Cambridge, lessons drawn from tens of thousands of people and hundreds of studies, and a myriad of the brightest sociologists, anthropologists and neuroscientists in the world, that relational wealth, not material wealth, is a stronger indicator of happiness throughout our lives, and that social isolation is a killer.

We know that the quality of our relationships is a far better predictor of physical health than cholesterol levels; that it is our relationships that enable us to be psychologically more resilient, disrupt mental and physical decline, and are much better predictors of human flourishing than social class, IQ, or even our genetic makeup. Indeed, we know more now from the field of social neuroscience about how our relationships affect our brains, our bodies and how our bodies can impact our brains than we have ever done.'

Moreover, we also know that the ability of a child to connect to school (particularly from the age of 10 upwards) is a key protective factor that lowers the likelihood of health-risk behaviours, while also enhancing positive educational outcomes (Resnick et al., 1993; Resnick, 2000; Glover et al., 1998; Blum & Libbey, 2004; Libbey, 2004). We know that where attachment in the classroom context is more secure, relationships can surmount social inequality. And we know that where they are weak or fragile, they reinforce educational disadvantage.'

The report went on to say; 'These (studies) show that, where relationships are dysfunctional, the negative impact on student outcomes is significant. Young people are at higher risk of mental illness, at risk of manifesting aggressive or withdrawn behaviours, and of being more likely to underachieve academically and end up unemployed.

Research indicates that certain, more generalised, personal teacher traits or behaviours are correlated with school well-being (Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007). Research by Montalvo et al. (2007) indicates that students' attainment increases in classes taught by teachers that they like. The team highlighted the correlation between student effort (specifically persistence) and their liking or disliking for a teacher. Hallinan (2008) argues that when students feel valued and respected by their teachers, so their attachment to school strengthens. A teacher's use of praise (or unwillingness to praise) will, according to Pintrich and Schunk, impact on student perceptions of the teacher and their commitment to the classroom or the school. They argue that, 'positive persuasive feedback creates a sense of efficacy which is a motivating influence' (Pintrich, 2002: p.230). Crucial to this is the teacher's ability to recognise the impact of certain behaviours; teachers' self-perception of their agency impacts on their relationships in the classroom (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). Those 'teachers who believe that they have an influence on students tend to interact in ways that enhance student investment and achievement' (Hamre and Pianta, 2001: p.51).'

## 1.4 The Biblical Narrative and Relationship

Research and neuroscience only confirms what the bible has said all along about the importance and value of relationship. In fact you could go as far as to say that the whole of the biblical narrative could be summed up, using the lens of relationships, in the following way:

Relationship was and is:

- experienced perfectly in the godhead
- extended kindly to mankind at creation
- ended abruptly in the Garden of Eden
- experienced imperfectly due to our sin natures
- emancipated graciously through Christ's work on the cross and will one day be
- enjoyed eternally by all those that look away from themselves to Christ.

Each of the school's that I visited in Melbourne together with Linfield College in southern California, had a strong emphasis on building relationships with their students and sharing the bible's perspective on our need to not only develop strong relationships with their peers, but also with the one who made them.

## 1.5 The HCS Story

While I was on sabbatical one of our secondary teacher's emailed a student's reflection which serves to highlight the value and impact of relationship. This senior student beautifully captured this in her curriculum vitae:

'Throughout my schooling years, I have been to both special charter and public schools. At both, I had amazing teachers but going to Hastings Christian School for my later high school years I found that the teachers were a little different. They had this joy and enthusiasm yet also were caring towards all their students even when we were difficult! It didn't feel as they saw us just as their job. I think it has something to do with their faith, as it could only be through Jesus that they were able to give so much and get the energy to do so.... This past year I've had one of my high school teachers mentoring me. Through this, I've come to understand how much of an impact teachers have on our lives. I believe that being able to reach kids to connect and encourage them is so important.'

Angie Pratt, the acting DP while I was on sabbatical, captured the importance of relationship well when she wrote the following in the term 3 secondary school newsletter;

'The power of an HCS education lies in relationships that develop between your children and their teachers. I have certainly appreciated the numerous Christian teachers who have spoken God's truth into the lives of my own children. Their influence has given my own children, and many others I am sure, a solid Christian foundation to launch themselves into life. It is no accident that relationship and truth are central to our school mission statement. "To walk students through all fields of human thought and endeavour, discerning and celebrating Truth". The idea of "walking" speaks of a life-long relationship that develops between students and teachers.'

Authentic relationships are a rare commodity in today's climate. Relationships are vitally important to children's (particularly teenagers') mental health and well-being. At the end of



last term, our teachers were privileged to listen to Josh McDowell talk about Generation Z. These digital natives are the kings of contradictions. They are the most connected generation, yet they are characterised by loneliness. They have enormous opportunity but are plagued with crippling anxiety. In many ways it was not surprising to hear that relationships and a Christian worldview are key for this generation. It is no mistake that the triune God is in perfect relationship and have adopted us into this relationship. Ephesians 1:3-14.'

## **2.0 Biblical Principles to Guide a Pastoral Care Programme**

### 2.1 Theology and Psychology

The diametrically opposed worldviews held by those who hold to a secular psychological model of addressing problems and those that hold to a biblical understanding of the world cannot be greater. Secular psychology starts with the presupposition that mankind is an exclusively material being without a soul. Those that hold to a theological worldview start with a recognition that people not only have an immaterial soul but that we owe our existence and allegiance to the God who made us.

Secular thinkers in the field of psychology have provided many helpful insights into some of the causes and symptoms of the problems people face. However the fact that their source of authority is merely their own and others theories and observations - rather than entertaining the idea that we need revelation (the bible) from outside of ourselves to interpret the human condition - only further serves to illustrate the gulf that exists in the worldviews at play.

Without an understanding of the biblical doctrine of the 'inability of man' (also known as the depravity of man) to remedy his greatest need - resulting from his alienation from God in the garden of Eden, all attempts to remedy the problems he faces are at best temporary. Our ultimate need is not 'peace of mind' but 'peace with God.'

A pastoral care programme that holds to a secular worldview may help to alleviate a student's symptoms, however unless the root cause of our problems is traced back to our separation from God (aka 'the fall') we fail to provide any real hope in time or eternity.

### 2.2 Preparing Students for Failure

The Bible's uniform message is that failure and disappointment are an inevitable part of the human experience (because of the fall of man in the garden of Eden). The book of Job recognises that '... man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.'

In an article entitled 'Failure and Disappointment in Scripture,' David Murray stated; If our schools really wanted to prepare our children for life, they would offer classes in failure and disappointment. Our kids may never need to know algebra or chemistry in their adult lives, but they will definitely need to know how to handle failure and disappointment. He went on to add;

When we turn to the Bible, we're given a deep dose of reality. Failure and disappointment are on just about every page. Whether we like it or not, that's much truer to life than the success narratives that we aspire to and are trying to write for ourselves. By all means, aim high, but recognize that no one escapes failure and disappointment. So, we might as well plan on it and prepare for it with a view to profiting from it.

How much better it would prepare our children for life, especially in the area of managing their expectations, if they not only were helped to understand that failure is inevitable, but also that there is much that can be learned from it.

One of the problems with the constant success narratives that we are fed today is the message that success is for everyone and everyone will be a success. The result is that no one is prepared when success never visits and when failure knocks at their door repeatedly. Conscious of this imbalance, Johannes Haushofer of Princeton University published a résumé listing his career failures on Twitter. He did this "in an attempt to balance the record and encourage others to keep trying in the face of disappointment." "Most of what I try fails," he said, "but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible. I have noticed that this sometimes gives others the impression that most things work out for me."

### 2.3 Guiding Principles

While I was unable to meet personally with the head of the pastoral care programme at Cedar College in Adelaide, I was able to interview the person that was responsible for developing the programme. Brian Morton is a trained biblical counsellor and heads up Biblical Counselling New Zealand (BCNZ).

One of the guiding verses that underlies the pastoral care programme he developed is found in Galatians 6:9-10 which says;

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Further to this Brian illustrated from the bible, God's call to compassionately care like Christ. Some well-known examples of God's care through Christ are found in the following Scripture references.

- Matthew 9:36 - Christ's compassion for the crowds
- Matthew 14:14 - God's care in feeding the 5,000
- Matthew 15:32 - God's care in feeding the 4,000
- Mark 9:22 - Christ's care for the demonically possessed boy
- Luke 7:13 - Christ's care for the widow's son
- Luke 10:33 - Parable of the good Samaritan
- Luke 15:20 - Parable of the prodigal son

He went on to say that Christ's heart was moved with compassion for people who were hurting, hungry, oppressed and deceived. He met their needs in very practical ways, but far and above His concern for their temporal wellbeing was His primary concern for their spiritual condition. It is this type of care which primarily God calls His people to provide.

Matthew 10:28 - Christ's teaching on the greater value of the soul  
Matthew 16:26 - Christ's warning of indulging the body and the forfeiture of the soul  
Luke 12:19-20 - Parable of the rich fool

The Bible repeatedly calls God's people to compassionately care for others

Acts 6:1-7 - Care for the widows  
Philippians 2:4 - Prefer others above our own needs  
Proverbs 21:13 - Warning to not close our ears to the cries of the needy  
Proverbs 28:27 - Repeats the warning  
Proverbs 19:17 - Compassionate care for others expresses the genuineness of our love for God  
1 John 3:17-18 - True love is demonstrated by our compassionate care for others  
James 1:27 - True religion shows genuine care  
Galatians 5:22 - Kindness and goodness are fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit

Brian emphasised the important role the bible plays in biblical counselling, and by extension a pastoral care programme in a Christian School. He said that the scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments are authoritative and sufficient for all the issues facing you in life.

He went on to say, "Many people say they believe in the authority of Scripture, but their practice denies its sufficiency to meet their needs. For example, "Christian psychology" attempts to integrate various psychological theories and humanistic philosophies with the Scriptures because it lacks confidence in the Word of God to deal with a person's "real" problems."

Brian said that biblical counselling on the other hand, both in its message and method, is conducted with a commitment to the absolute sufficiency of Scripture as the means by which a Christian's spiritual problems must be addressed and solved.

### Final Thoughts on Pastoral Care

While in southern California I interviewed a friend who heads up the pastoral counselling ministry at Faith Bible Church. While Nigel primarily counsels adults the principles he shared, I believe, encapsulate the key principles that speak to the issues of wellbeing, relationship and pastoral care as articulated in this report. The following is a summary of his counselling philosophy.

'When I first meet a couple who want marriage counselling, I'll ask them to give me a history of their relationship, testimony, summary of issues etc. I'll also ask them to identify what they want me to do for them. Often, they will desire therapeutic fixes or short-term changes believing these will improve their situation.

I've learned that most people do not do the best self-evaluation. The thing they believe is the main issue is usually not the main issue at all. Often that's why they end up in counselling. They're not able to identify the real issues and therefore cannot address them from a biblical perspective.

I explain to couples that I am not a therapist. I am a pastor. I am primarily concerned for the state of their souls. I want to address eternally important questions knowing that when a person is walking in step with Christ, submitting to the gospel, and applying biblical principles, they will experience the joys of full assurance and God's grace. They could be married to the worst person in the world (note: they're not), and they can still access full joy, full blessing, full gratitude by knowing Christ and walking in fear of Him who only gives good gifts, yes even good trials.

Since the marriage covenant and relationship is modelled after God's promise-keeping character and trinitarian relationship, then the starting point to any marriage counselling is knowledge of God and the gospel. For this reason, I will ask a couple to put their horizontal relationship issues `on hold until we lay gospel foundations first. We'll work on vertical relationships with God, then turn to their marriage difficulties later.

I've found that when couples truly walk with Christ, are filled with His Spirit, and are committed to seeing life through the lens of God's Word, they are then in a position to endure any of life's circumstances and trials. They begin to see the trials as God's kindness towards them. Instead of running from difficulties, they learn to embrace the hardships, knowing that God uses these experiences to make them more like Christ. This new way of seeing life rightly may come in weeks, months, or sometimes years of biblical input...'

In the same way, helping students get perspective, by assisting them to see their problems in reference to a wise and loving God who works all things for their good and His glory, should be the goal of the biblical counsel that is offered to them in a Christian school. Even if a student never comes to understand the 'why' of the problem(s) they face, they can be helped to know the 'who' it is that is in control.

Healthy relationships and a biblically informed student pastoral care programme don't guarantee that students will thrive in a Christian School, but they certainly can go long way towards that end.

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