Defining and Assessing Spiritual Formation: A Necessity for Christian Schooling

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Abstract

Assessing Spiritual Formation Abstract

Virtually every Christian school promises a "Christian" this, a "God-centered" that, or a "biblical" something else in its mission and philosophy statements. These commitments are used in marketing, and are regarded as educational outcomes for each school. Christian schools are fairly skilled with their assessments of academic outcomes, but many are not even trying to assess the spiritual formation of their students. With the development of qualitative research methods over the past few decades, Christian educators now have reliable, robust, and usable methods to complete this important evaluation of their programs and practices. This article explores this important topic and provides practical guidance for each school to get busy with this neglected work while also describing ongoing research in assessing spiritual formatio

Keywords

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Years ago, one of the authors of this essay was meeting with an accreditation team as they were exiting our school after a three-day visit. They commended us on a number of areas they saw as strengths, but towards the conclusion of their visit, they raised this question: "We see phrases in your mission statement like helping students 'develop a biblical ethical system' and that your students will have a 'Christ-like influence on their culture.' How are you doing with those goals?" We stammered around for answers, but truthfully didn't have a valid response. The accreditation team was not trying to be snide, but wanted to know how we were assessing the spiritual formation of our students.

Every Christian school has in its own mission, vision, or purpose statements, various promises about a "Jesus-this", a "Biblical-that", or a "Christian-something else". These aspirational terms describe the intended spiritual formation of students through curricular and co-curricular programs, and the assessment of these spiritual formation efforts in Christian schools is the focus of this essay. The authors are in the midst of a qualitative research project on spiritual formation, and have asked school administrators to talk with us about their assessment of affective and behavioral educational outcomes related to the habits of the heart. The initial responses have not always been encouraging—many schools are just like ours was when that accrediting team visited. Schools are trying a variety of spiritual formation programs and initiatives, but in most cases the assessment is lacking. Some leaders have acknowledged the need to assess spiritual formation, but recognize that they do not know how, others claim, "the heart can't be measured,"

while others don't regard this as a high priority to assess, compared to cognitive academic outcomes.

The development of qualitative research as a valid methodology, though, has created a valuable and exciting pathway for Christian schools to collect rich and meaningful data to assess spiritual formation. It is important to stress from the outset that the qualitative research assessments of spiritual formation described in this essay are not methods for "grading" students on their spirituality, but for evaluating educators and programs on how they are doing when it comes to facilitating habits and growth. The strategies explained below enable individual schools to strengthen what is working well, while also guiding improvements where needed, but not comparing schools to each other. This essay defines what we mean by spiritual formation in K-12 schooling, provides historical context and related definitions, outlines the key aspects of qualitative research, and describes how this critically important assessment can happen uniquely for each Christian school. A future article will summarize and discuss our current research on spiritual formation assessments, along with specific recommendations for successful action.

Spiritual Formation
Spiritual formation is a biblically-guided process of growth and transformation that leads to more and more wholeness in Christ, a flourishing life guided by God's wisdom resulting in service to others and His Kingdom because of God's grace.

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Spiritual formation is a personal journey manifested in love, and is most commonly experienced in and through relationships in community. As hearts are changed and maturity occurs, individuals become active participants in the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Evidence of spiritual formation in a person's life is manifested in a variety of ways as the truth of Jesus flows more and more naturally from that person in what she thinks, says, and does. New habits and practices emerge. It is an inward change of the heart exhibited with external fruits of the spirit. Spiritual formation is a life-long process, so what happens in K-12 schooling is a part of the final picture.

It is beyond the scope of this essay, but there is an ongoing discussion in theological journals as to the relationships between sanctification and spiritual formation (Dunson, 2019). As this essay will demonstrate, there are also multiple opinions and approaches to spiritual formation in Christian schooling, reflecting varying theological perspectives. This multiplicity of terms and methodologies is part of the focus in the second and third sections of this essay. We have not found an approach; however, like the individual school qualitative proposals described later in this essay. Before focusing on K-12 schools, it is helpful to note some of the relevant writing and research on spiritual formation in higher education.

Evidence of spiritual formation in a person's life is manifested in a variety of ways as the truth of Jesus flows more and more naturally from that person in what she thinks, says, and does. New habits and practices emerge. It is an inward change of the heart exhibited with external fruits of the spirit. Spiritual formation is a life-long process, so what happens in K-12 schooling is a part of the final picture.

Several decades ago, a 10-year study was conducted with young Christian adults, mostly university students aged 18-22, to assess their church commitment, moral values, and growth in religious experience (Dudley, 2000). One of the conclusions is that direct instruction, coercion, and a cognitive appeal to live and think as the teacher did were not effective strategies. "Values cannot be passed from head to head without going through the heart. . . Values, in other words, are not passively received; they are actively developed" (Dudley, 2000, p. 7). The development of moral values and ethical behavior, evidence of spiritual formation, is positively affected by critical thinking, reasoning, and the freedom to make choices with real consequences even when choosing the wrong path is an option. This best occurs within grace-filled relationships in which the teacher models biblical thinking and living, along with ample opportunities to try, fail, and grow.

Theological seminaries have recently developed an interest in evaluating spiritual formation among their students as they prepare for positions of spiritual leadership. One approach (Porter et al., 2019) presented a meta-theory for assessing spiritual growth by suggesting a distinction between (a) spiritual formation (for example, what is held as "sacred" by the person, i.e. the love of God or the Word of God), (b) characterological formation (habituated dispositions like kindness and love), and (c) moral formation (outward manifestations of one's character such as forgiveness or service). The approach is interesting, but it is intentionally very broad ecumenically, doesn't offer a research strategy to evaluate these three levels of formation, doesn't make it clear the differences between the three formations (for example, is someone who volunteers to work at a food bank primarily demonstrating spiritual, characterological, or moral formation?), and the meta-theory tends to reinforce a sacred/secular dichotomy. Some (Dockery, 2000; Palmer, 2007) argued that increased secularization encourages dualisms like this on multiple levels, at odds with Paul's admonition to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

One final example from higher education is an excellently researched qualitative study by Sarinah Lo (2020) in Indonesia, in which she challenged the cognitive-heavy understanding and practice of faith integration in Christian education. In her work, Lo (2020) distinguished the effectiveness of faith integration among Christian higher education faculty in these categories: being, knowing, and doing, arguing in part that it is a Western construct to favor Christian knowing (cognitive abilities) over Christian being and doing. Lo (2020) wrote, "The findings of this study suggest that Christian faculty in Indonesia have a strong emphasis on their faith-integrated being, but less on their faith-integrated knowing and doing" (p. 236). The findings of Lo's (2020) qualitative research described faculty who have developed pietistic personal lives and habits without giving as much attention to a faith-informed knowledge or practice.

This dualistic approach to spiritual formation is not unique to higher education. Iselin and Meteyard (2010) noted, "In many Christian education institutions (and, indeed, in Christian intellectual pursuit in general) there remains the dissonance of fragmented and poorly practiced worldviews that do not seamlessly unite belief and behaviour and erroneously create false dichotomies between head and heart knowledge" (p. 35). Building instead on the research of Steven Garber (1996), some institutions promote an "incarnational choreography" that includes incarnational pedagogy, integrative and holistic learning, a celebration of mystery and paradox, an emphasis on community and relationships, and a strong use of story and metaphor. This is rooted more in what a student loves (habits of the heart) than having the correct answers in their head. The reality for Christian schools of all levels, then, is this: without regular assessments of spiritual formation, educators won't know if the programs and procedures in place for spiritual growth and development are promoting a fragmented, cognitive, dualistic, and therefore ineffective biblical framework. As Elliot Eisner (1985) memorably wrote, schools have three types of curriculum: explicit, implicit, and null. We tend to know and assess the explicit curriculum (i.e., reading, math, science), but fail to do so with the implicit (what is valued; what really counts for that school; "how we do it here") and null (what schools do not teach) curriculums (Eisner, 1985).

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Over the past 20 years, K-12 schools have increased their awareness of the need for spiritual formation, and in some cases have sought to implement research and practice. The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) has published a number of articles in their Christian School Education magazine related to spiritual formation. Essenburg (2010) helpfully suggested five elements for assessing biblical perspectives across the curriculum, and Basnett (2016) described how her school uses surveys and Likert scales with alumni and current students to measure outcomes. Vryhof (2005) argued that the real measure of the success of Christian schooling is the effect graduates have in the world for the Kingdom of God, but nothing is suggested about how to assess that. In a similar vein, Erdvig (2016) connected spiritual formation to a consistent biblical worldview, but acknowledged this is a lofty goal that is "not often discussed in any thoughtful manner in our schools" (p. 15). Marrah (2013) and Marrah and Hall (2011) wrote about "relational spirituality" that needs to be assessed, promoting a combined quantitative and qualitative approach, while Dill (2016) raised a number of questions and difficulties with assessing spiritual formation yet argued that Christian schools need to measure those outcomes. Egeler (2007) endorsed tools like the Spiritual Transformation Inventory, Spiritual Formation Assessment, and Spirit Plus which in part use quantitative research, surveys, and Likert

scales. Many of these approaches and articles reference Cultivating Christian Character (Zigarelli, 2005), a book published by ACSI, which advocated "a scientific approach" to assessing spiritual formation "rather than one that's exegetical, theological, psychological, philosophical, or anecdotal" (p. 22). Finally, research has also been conducted related to the roles of school counselors in the spiritual formation of students (Sink et al., 2007; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013). Instead of a rigid, cognitive, and indoctrination approach, spiritual formation is viewed as "a developmental process that encourages partnerships, in which Christian school counselors collaborate with students, teachers, peer groups, and caregivers to facilitate a healthy spiritual life" (Sink et al., 2007, p. 48).

Lastly, the Bible provides numerous exhortations for a robust and comprehensive spiritual growth, a lifelong journey from spiritual infancy towards spiritual maturity: Matthew 22:37-40, Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:19, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, and Titus 2:11-14. These passages, along with others, underscore one of the first challenges of assessing spiritual formation: the sanctifying spiritual growth of an individual is unique, is a continual process, and involves innumerable people, locations, situations, influences, and impulses across a lifetime. Spiritual formation is an individual and personal journey, but occurs within the context of community and partnerships (i.e., the Christian home, church, and school) as emphasized by Macmurray (1936). The K-12 Christian school experience is best located in this larger mosaic, and qualitative research allows for differentiations, as we will discuss.

Historical Background and Related Terms

James Coleman (1990) theorized that private religious schools are examples of what he called "functional communities," groups that share the same values and beliefs, thus producing social capital, which in turn allowed for the "intergenerational closure" (p. 36) necessary for supporting and encouraging a child's growth into adulthood. Coleman (1990) argued that in addition to the physical capital (buildings and equipment) and the human capital (individual knowledge, skills, and experiences of educators), there is also social capital (the collaborative power of educators agreeing and working together), which is important in providing a consistent and nurturing environment for students.

Coleman (1987) defined a functional community as "a community in which social norms and sanctions, including those that cross generations, arise out of the social structure itself, and both reinforce and perpetuate that structure" (p. 7). These communities tend to have a common set of values and expectations with strong generational bonds between adults and children, making the transfer of values easier. Coleman's (1987) research focused primarily on Catholic schools, in which he discovered higher levels of social capital that translated, in part, to higher levels of moral or character development in students. Character education, in this sense, is an intentional process through deliberate strategies and practices which guide a student's thinking and decision making so that virtuous behaviors like generosity, forgiveness, and perseverance become more consistent. Like Coleman (1987), character education proponents Thomas Lickona (1992) and Kevin Ryan (1999) have also worked in part within Catholic schooling. Lickona (1992) referenced an unpublished comment Coleman made at an American Educational Research Association symposium in 1985, noting that "schools are being asked to carry more and more of the burden of moral education with less support" (p. 35), making the work of functional communities within schools more challenging. A strong functional community in a Christian school, then, improves the likelihood of successful spiritual formation.

Spiritual formation within a functional community also has roots 400 years ago in Central Europe. Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670) is often referred to as the "Father of Modern Education." Comenius, the Bohemian (today Czech Republic) Reformation pastor and educator, was an innovator in educational pedagogy and practice, a leader whose textbooks were in constant use in numerous countries for over three centuries. His international reputation was such that he was offered but declined the presidency of Harvard in

1641, and in 1642 had a lengthy meeting with Rene Descartes, one of the proponents of what would become known as the Enlightenment. Descartes later wrote that Comenius's philosophy of education was more "whole" than his, even though they acknowledged their fundamental differences (Murphy, 1995). Among the educational innovations Comenius advocated were universal and egalitarian education, experiential learning, learner-centered pedagogy, the importance of play ("instruction with amusement that they may take pleasure in learning serious things"), mastery of one's native tongue followed by other language acquisition, the centrality of oral-aural development, and a constant direction towards love of God and others (Murphy, 1995). Comenius encouraged the study of music and drama, and was one of the first to include illustrations and drawings in reading books for children.

The formation of faith in the lives of students, though, was the most important work for educators: "the fundamental aim and end of all education he regarded as moral and religious" (Monroe, 1900, p. 120). The three primary goals, Comenius wrote, are "to know oneself (and with oneself all things), to rule oneself, and to direct oneself to God" (Murphy, 1995, p. 85). Formation and discipleship are to saturate the school and all learning, and the critical link is the role of the teacher as the moral example: "No real teaching is done by those who do not constantly set a good example, that is, who order pupils to do what they do not do themselves" (Murphy, 1995, p. 159). In fact, Comenius advocated that "students learn their teachers" urging "all teachers act as disciplers, living our lives in the view of students" (Beech, 2020, p. 67). Spiritual formation, then, was a discipling formation of students, requiring Christian educators themselves to be immersed in a consistent and coherent biblical foundation for teaching and learning. The virtues of this spiritual formation are modeled and implanted (a) through the expansion of the intellect, by (b) redirecting desires to embrace things that "bring joy and no regrets," and (c) practicing virtue by "putting it to the test" (Murphy, 1995, p. 164). Early copies of his Orbis Pictus, a textbook for children, depicted a teacher and a student on a journey together, a beautiful image of community and relationship in action.

In recent years, spiritual formation has become the more common term for the moral development of students in Christian schools, but some definitions and delineations help. As noted, some similarities can be found in the character education initiatives of the twentieth century, a movement with historical connections in moral education in early America. Spiritual formation, though, is a significant dimension of Christian schooling, as evidenced by mission and vision statements. One writer argued that "spiritual formation is the key organizing principle of Christian education at all times" (Steibel, 2010, p. 342), while another declared that "spiritual formation is and must be the focus of Christian school programming" (Horan, 2017, p. 56). Significantly, in a 2020 US Supreme Court decision, the majority opinion written by Justice Alito in a 7-2 decision argued, "Educating young people in their faith, inculcating its teachings, and training them to live their faith are responsibilities that lie at the very core" of what religious schools do" (Our Lady of Guadalupe School v Agnes Morrissey-Berru, 2020, p. 18). As Alito (2020) observed, "The religious education and formation of students is the very reason for the existence of most private religious schools" (p. 2).

Moral education in early American schooling was as common as reading and math, and these religious underpinnings have Puritan influences back to Europe. The New England Primer was one of the most successful textbooks in colonial America, and each page is filled with explicit moral and ethical lessons. These moral lessons were often drawn from biblical teaching like "In Adam's fall we sinned all" to introduce the letter A. These moral lessons continued for decades even through the introduction of Horace Mann's "Common School" movement in the nineteenth century, even though public education became less connected with Protestantism.

In the twentieth century, moral education was further shaped by the fields of psychology and sociology through the work of scholars like Lawrence Kohlberg, Benjamin Bloom, B.F. Skinner, Emile Durkheim, and Jean Piaget. None of these wrote from an explicit faith orientation, but

instead stressed human reason, and, in some cases, science, as pathways to morality and equilibrium. More specifically, Sewall (1999) noted that moral education involved "learning about good conduct. . . allow[ing] us to treat others as we wish to be treated" (p. 14). Some Christian theological traditions label their helpful writing as "common grace insights."

Significantly, Nicholas Wolterstorff (1980) wrote Educating for Responsible Action in the midst of the growth and development of moral education as it related to psychology in order to offer a biblical analysis of these trends. Wolterstorff (1980) differentiated between three types of learning in schools through which teachers hope to influence students. Cognitive learning is what is true and what can be known. Ability learning moves students from unskilled to skilled capabilities and competencies based on that knowledge. Third, tendency learning, what some call moral education, has to do with the inclinations, dispositions, and habits of the heart. This is the focus of his book. Christian education, Wolterstorff (1980) argued, is education aimed at "training for the Christian way of life" (p.14) (affective), not just education aimed at inculcating the Christian world and life view (cognitive). As Wolterstorff (1980) noted, "This implies, straightforwardly, that what we have called tendency learning is an essential component in a program of Christian education. . . Education must aim at producing alterations in what students tend (are disposed, are inclined) to do" (pp. 14-15). Christian schooling, in this sense, is about transferring a way of life from teacher to student, and tendency learning occurs didactically and through the consistent examples of educators modeled before students, similar to what Comenius advocated. This approach is not centered on "integrating a biblical worldview" into the school, but rather the formation of an alternative and biblically informed lifestyle. Rooted in gratitude, Wolterstorff called for "counter-cultural Christian schools that educate for a distinctively Christian way of being in the world that . . . values justice and peace" (Placher, 2005, p. 255), and not simply getting our thinking straight.

Second, character education became a significant movement in American education in the second half of the twentieth century, and there are compelling reasons why this is the case. A number of tectonic philosophical shifts over the previous centuries—Enlightenment thinking, Darwinism, logical positivism, modernism, scientism, and the sexual revolution of the 1960s – drove some educators to reintroduce the principles of character into the curriculum as they experienced a growing tide of moral relativism. Thomas Lickona's Educating for Character (1992) is often cited with this development. Behind the character education movement are multiple philosophical and cultural trends, which may help the reader distinguish between character education, moral education, and spiritual formation. There are some overlaps in terminology and strategies, but also some sharp distinctions, the most significant of which is that spiritual formation is intentionally and explicitly biblically informed and guided.

The pursuit of spiritual formation has commonly been propelled by disciplines and practices such as Bible reading, prayer, worship, meditation, and living biblically in community with one another. This essay is focused on Christian schools, but many helpful authors including Nouwen (1981), Hauerwas (1981), Merton (1960), Peterson (2000), and Bonhoeffer (1959) have written insightfully about formation in the church. The spiritual disciplines, the habits, practices, and rituals described by these and other authors, guide individuals spiritually as physical exercise, workouts, and training do for the body.

James K.A. Smith (2009, 2013, 2016, 2019) described Christian schooling and spiritual formation as a rehabituation of the heart, rooting this emphasis in the Bible and particularly in the writings of St. Augustine. With his permission, here is a portion of his remarks to Covenant College's graduate education students and faculty at their summer 2020 Convocation:

"Christian schooling is an arena of remarkable opportunity in our secular age precisely because Christian education is an endeavor that realizes that education is about more than information. Christian education is a holistic endeavor that aims to shape the whole person, and in particular to shape the habits of the heart. A Christian school is for lovers because we are what we love. To shape a people who bear God's image to the world and for

the sake of the world, we need to shape not only their intellects but also their affections. If the goal of the Christian school is to shape citizens of the coming Kingdom, to send out alumni who live and move and have their being in Christ who is the hope of the world, educators need to see themselves as lovers. Formative and holistic Christian education is an erotic endeavor to reorient hearts and minds towards Kingdom come. So, a Christian education is about learning to love God and to love what God loves, to become hungry for what the prophets called shalom that characterizes God's rule. In this understanding, love is a habit and formation is an exercise in rehabituation. Christian schools are a place where God wants to recalibrate the habits of our hearts. Christian educators are coming alongside learners to try to be part of that endeavor of rehabituation, recalibrating the human heart.

Precisely for this same reason, the Christian school also has to be a prophetic institution. There are important ways that Christian schools have to be sites of counter-formation, for unlearning disordered loves and idolatrous habits. In the spirit of the biblical tradition, Christian education has to inhabit a prophetic tradition. What did the prophets do? How did they love the people of God? By calling out their complicity with disordered systems, by naming all the ways they became assimilated to other kingdoms. To be truly prophetic is to love God, love the good that God calls us to, and love a people enough to call them to that good, to embody that good, to call them back to God, to bend hearts towards Kingdom come."

We have identified five primary components of spiritual formation. In this summary, a few connections between moral and character education to a fuller, holistic, and biblical description of spiritual formation in Christian schooling are evident. Again, this is not to suggest that these three terms are synonymous, but rather to acknowledge the parallels, to link these components with the preceding historical context, and to preview what follows in the final section. Christian schooling and spiritual formation do not occur in a vacuum, and it enhances our understanding and practice to be aware of this history.

First, spiritual formation should be understood holistically, that, as Cohen (1985) wrote, "The

most successful approaches stress not only curriculum, but also changing the culture of schools to make them communities that reinforce positive values and character traits" (p. 1). Schools, therefore, need to assess everything they do – from grading procedures, to athletics, to how students are treated in the halls, to what programs are offered and why, to how school days and the academic year are structured – to determine if practices match with stated beliefs and values. Each individual experience and encounter in a Christian school ideally supports the moral climate and spiritual development of students. David Smith (2018) suggested that Christian teaching is marked by a consistent faith that "informs the processes, the moves, the practices, the pedagogy, and not just the ideas that are conveyed or the spirit in which they are offered" (p. vii). The most successful programs seem to be the ones that integrate formative initiatives into the whole curriculum, not just adding a class or two on good behavior or offering a weekly chapel, but seeking to be comprehensive and holistic. When Christian educators interact with students as whole beings, spiritual formation is a daily effort that touches on all aspects of teaching and learning.

Second, the development of virtue is conducive to and stimulated by successful academic programs (Wynne & Walberg, 1985). As Ryan (1996) noted, "Character education is not merely an educational trend or the school's latest fad; it is a fundamental dimension of good teaching, an abiding respect for the intellect and spirit of the individual" (p. 81). To that end, Lickona (1992) advocated a "value-centered curriculum" (p. 184) that makes moral education a priority in teaching and learning. Teachers should "think of themselves as practical ethicists, . . . and integrate ethics instruction into their regular courses" (DeHaan et al., 1997, p. 16). Everything that happens in the classroom is teaching some story about human beings, right and wrong, what has value, and a multitude of other moral lessons. Nothing is neutral.

Third, many authors wrote about the value of character-based literature and the need to identify individuals with whom students can relate. "It is not surprising that the bulk of moral education in human history has been through models, examples, heroes – that is, through stories"

(Taylor, 1995, p. 34). "Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 125). William Bennett's (1993) Book of Virtues is an example, St. Augustine's Confessions (Rudin, 2018) is an ancient exemplar, and James K.A. Smith (2009, 2013, 2016, 2019) provided more current reminders of the power of story to rehabituate the heart.

If Christian schooling is about preparing students for effective Christian living, students need faithful and trustworthy teacher-disciplers to walk with them through these formative years.

Fourth, students need to experience an academic community that grapples with real issues in order for formation to be most effective. "The transmission of values does not happen in the abstract or merely through articulation or admonition. It happens in relationships" (OAIS, 1998, p. 1). If Christian schooling is about preparing students for effective Christian living, students need faithful and trustworthy teacher-disciplers to walk with them through these formative years. Intentional steps towards community, for example "schools within a school" groupings, can connect each student with caring adults who model these virtues. In short, successful spiritual formation is an undertaking that must infuse the entire school.

Fifth, a qualitative and action-research project conducted by the Friends Council on Education, (McHenry, 2000) discovered that moral education and character development can make significant strides forward during an unlikely circumstance: conflict. McHenry (224) wrote, "The astounding conclusion of the FCE study was that conflict is the crucible from which individual moral growth emerges; conflict is, in fact, the primary locus for moral growth in adolescents" (p. 224). The key component that made this growth possible in the Friends schools was the existence of a strong community that encouraged dialogue, care, respect, and tolerance. Conflict, failure, and the messiness of life – situations most like to avoid – are often catalysts for change and grace-infused growth.

James Davison Hunter (2000) noted that lasting effects are seen in schools which offer a climate "that coherently incarnates a moral culture defined by a clear and intelligible understanding of public and private good" (p. 155). These climates are ones in which virtue is naturally and routinely woven into the fabric of what is taught, but also evident in the very structure of what the school values. Even though Hunter was writing more broadly about public schooling, those involved in Christian schools likely resonate with this. Christian educators know from experience that when there is agreement on what is right and wrong, when a moral emphasis is regularly and naturally woven into classrooms, hallways, and athletic fields, when the adults are clear and consistent about expectations and are relationally involved with students' growth and development, good results follow. Yet, experiences reveal inconsistencies, our own sins and shortcomings, and the competing narratives in culture that tug at hearts cause the success of spiritual formation to be spotty at best. As Graham (2009) noted, "process as content" (p. 16) tends to dominate in our schools, so our actions and procedures speak louder than our words. David Smith (2018) reminded us that a faith-informed pedagogy that contributes to spiritual formation is a life-long pursuit. Becoming a consistent Christian educator is a day-to-day and year-to-year process, filled with starts and stops, successes and failures. A key ingredient for educators, of course, is personally growing in wisdom as they read, study, meditate, and search the Word of God, the light for our path. Stated negatively, it is less likely students in Christian schools will grow in their faith, maturity, and spiritual formation in an environment in which the educators themselves are not doing so also.

Qualitative Assessment

The spiritual formation of students in K-12 schools is an important goal worthy of our efforts. However, the project of implementation and evaluation of programs for spiritual formation appears daunting. How are educators to obtain the necessary information for appropriately assessing

their success in the spiritual formation of their students? Qualitative research is a valuable method well suited to the task.

Assessment itself is often misunderstood. For example, when asked for a brief definition of assessment a common answer is simply – a test. This, of course, is a very limited perspective.

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More holistically, assessment is "the planning, collection, analysis, interpretation and use of data from multiple sources over time" (Gottlieb, 2016, p. 241). Gottlieb's definition recognized that, when conducted appropriately, assessment has the potential to drive development, implementation, and evaluation. A single shot assessment, then, does not deliver the most complete understanding. Rather, a thoroughly constructed, systematic, multi-instrument approach has the potential to provide a well-informed evaluation. Additionally, this systematic inquiry lends itself to the employment of research methods, and in particular we argue for qualitative research methods. Similar to the misunderstandings related to assessment, all too frequently research methods are reduced to those offering quantitative data. Certainly, quantitative research plays a role in investigations asking the important questions – how much?, how many?, how often?, and to what extent? Qualitative research, though, allows for additional questions related to why? and how? Therefore, if K-12 educators are interested in a full orbed understanding of their students' experiences related to spiritual formation, a qualitative study is necessary.

Qualitative analysis provides authentic, rich, and meaningful data which can be uniquely designed to meet the individual needs of schools.

Research methods have changed and adapted over the decades. The predominant philosophy throughout the Enlightenment era held that the world could be known in objective, definable, and measurable ways (Urban & Wagoner, 2014). Therefore, research was a process of discovering the world. With roots in the Cartesian project of radical doubt, this method proved very successful in the hard sciences. The introduction of the scientific method launched quantitative research into a position of primacy. The ultimate goal became not only defining the world, but also generalizing new understandings with the possibility of transferring results to other aspects of nature (Erickson, 2011). Despite its success in many disciplines, a realization grew that the scientific method was not as easily applicable to every discipline, for example the human sciences (psychology, sociology) which need a different method of interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The complexities of the human element revealed quantitative research to be poorly suited for providing adequate understandings. Through the discipline of anthropology, ethnography, and phenomenology developed as viable alternatives to quantitative methods (Erickson, 2011). These methods of inquiry provide a more appropriate fit for the human sciences, addressing questions left unanswered by quantitative methods. Patton (2002) indicated the qualitative-quantitative debate has ended, giving way to "a level of parallel respectability" (p. 265).

The purpose of any research is to collect information using numbers, tests, words, people, or situations to answer questions. However, "the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.15). Striving for depth of understanding, the qualitative researcher is interested in knowing the nature of the setting rather than making any predictions regarding what may happen in the future. In order to gain an understanding of the particular context, the researcher attempts to

know what individual lives are like and what meaning they are making of the particular circumstances. In the process of data collection and analysis, the role of the researcher is to be reflexive and adaptive in pursuit of deep understanding. While this responsiveness is necessary, it also leaves the researcher vulnerable to significant biases. As Patton (2002) indicated, "The human factor is the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis" (p.276). Therefore, the researcher must diligently monitor each step. Through a systematic process the researcher collects data, makes sense of that data, and then faithfully represents the findings.

Employed as a tool for assessing the spiritual formation of K-12 schools, qualitative research allows an individual school to tailor the process to their particular context, designing a study best suited for their needs. Understanding their audience and purpose, schools design a research question centered on the specific language in mission and vision statements. Rather than an interest in assigning a "grade" for spiritual formation to individual students, the research question seeks to gain detailed description of the experience of these individuals concerning their spiritual formation. Once the research questions have been established, methods best suited to collect the specific data can be determined. For example, a school could choose to conduct a survey of a large number of students and graduates, or participate in lengthy interviews with a select group of parents. Each method employed has its strengths, and used in combination with other qualitative methods provides the data that allows for rich and meaningful understanding of the spiritual formation occurring within the student body.

The assessment of spiritual formation becomes challenging when we recognize that Christian schools define that term in different ways.

Planning for the Assessment of Spiritual Formation

The assessment of spiritual formation becomes challenging when we recognize that Christian schools define that term in different ways. Some schools emphasize chapel programs, Bible classes, and mission trips as a barometer of spiritual growth and maturity. Other schools hope graduates will enter "full time ministry" as a validation of their Christian educational impact. Others place a high value on social and community involvement for their students through service learning programs, while others advocate a more personal and pietistic appraisal of students perhaps facilitated through relationships, mentoring, and counseling. In addition, there are classical schools, broadly Evangelical schools, schools rooted in the Reformed perspective, schools emphasizing personal piety, Seventh Day Adventist schools, home schools, covenantal schools, denominational schools, and independent schools - and each has unique emphases and perspectives.

When quantitative research is used to assess spiritual formation, the "correct" responses on those instruments inevitably reflect a theological bias for one or more responses, assumptions that may not fit the particular school using that assessment. They are easier to use – and, qualitative research is more time consuming – but the quantitative tools may not provide data that fit a particular school and its mission and purpose, nor do they allow for depth of inquiry. Instead, we argue for a qualitative assessment of spiritual formation within an individual school, reflecting the unique culture and climate of that school, not comparing results with other schools. Here are important initial steps to consider.

First, a school should complete the prior and important work of establishing its mission and philosophy, and listing carefully-crafted educational outcomes and learning objectives, all of which should then guide the curricular and co-curricular programs of that school. In other words, it is important that the "Jesus-this", a "Biblical-that", or a "Christian-something else" phrases in a school's documents are anchored in a clearly defined purpose of education and biblical framework for teaching and learning. Often, a

school is required to review these statements as part of the accreditation process and that's helpful, but these documents need to be living documents that are referred to and reviewed regularly. When these components are in place, then the unique qualitative assessment for that school results in significant data, measuring how effective the spiritual formation is in your school. A qualitative assessment of spiritual formation, then, measures success and progress against the mission, purpose, and objectives of that particular school, not against a pre-written quantitative instrument.

Second, someone, or some group of people, need to take the responsibility for leading this initiative. This should not fall to the head of school or principal per se, but should involve people who have some familiarity with qualitative research, effective interviewing skills which include good listening and follow up questions, the ability to interpret the data received as objectively as possible, and the time and commitment to spearhead this important assessment. As mentioned above, qualitative research takes time and effort, but the benefits of the outcomes make the effort worthwhile.

Third, locate the phrases in the school's mission and philosophy statements that speak of spiritual formation outcomes for students, and use those phrases to formulate questions. You may use these questions in interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, or other methodologies, but identifying the words and phrases your school has chosen to publicize is crucial. How many questions a school has depends on how many phrases exist in those missional documents, what the school hopes to achieve in the assessment, and other factors.

Fourth, there are multiple ways to conduct interviews and complete surveys with current students, but we specifically argue for the value of interviewing recent graduates, randomly selected. Randomly selecting graduates is one step to avoid potential bias by simply interviewing graduates you know well or think will say positive things. Currently-enrolled students may be tempted to respond to questions in order to please the interviewer, or to give what they think the "right answers" are, since they are still a student. Other advantages to interviewing graduates who are a year or two away from their graduation is that they are older (many will likely be in college), they have experienced new school settings with new friends and peer groups, and perhaps, most importantly, they are more likely to freely respond to questions, since they are no longer a student at the school. Interviewing graduates from many years out runs the risk of fuzzy memory, along with the likelihood that the school, personnel, and programs may have changed. A semi-structured interview format allows for exploration and follow-up questions in order to seek deeper meaning and evidence of formation and change, to differentiate between the spiritual formation that happened in the school as opposed to the home, church, or youth group, and to ask questions like "tell me more about that." Recording the interviews (there are many free ways to do that, along with a transcript) provides an accurate record of what is said.

Fifth, now what do you do with the data? "Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). During the analysis, researchers make determinations about which things go together and what patterns begin to emerge. It's important before digging through the data to know what you are looking for, but also how the responses will be evaluated. As stated earlier, we argue for a qualitative assessment of spiritual formation within an individual school, reflecting the unique culture and climate of that particular school, and there are multiple tools that can be implemented.

In closing, two final resources are recommended. The Moral Life of Schools (Jackson et al., 1993) is an example of qualitative research in this field, and could help to identify what the researcher is assessing. The authors spent over two years observing 18 different classrooms in public, private, and parochial schools to assess the moral instruction taking place. They concluded that schools contribute to formation in profound ways, but that most teachers and administrators aren't fully aware of the potency of their actions. Among the six broad categories they suggested, they

found that "expressive formation" (the modeling and example of educators with students) was the most effective strategy observed. Expressive formation may have usable connections with the spiritual formation approach of Comenius, as "students learn their teachers" (Beech, 2020, p. 67).

Just having biblical language in mission statements, holding special programs and chapels, and promising moral and spiritual formation is not sufficient. Each school should be willing and able to assess efforts in regular ways, and that is the focus of this essay and the current research we are conducting. James Davison Hunter and Ryan Olson (2018) recently edited a 10-part study of current character education initiatives in a variety of schools in The Content of Their Character. It is a helpful volume that summarizes the "moral ecologies" of notable efforts across the US in public, private, and religious schools. Ten different scholars completed two-week fieldwork visits in a variety of schools in order to learn about the character education efforts in each. As the authors noted, schooling in the US has largely had a cognitive emphasis to the neglect of so-called "softer" aspects of education that touch on character, honesty, empathy, and other virtuous attitudes and behaviors. They acknowledge these moral characteristics are more difficult to measure, but assessment is needed. Each of the 10 visits in The Content of Their Character involved observations, interviews, focus groups, and archival research to determine the quality of the moral ecology of that school.

David Sikkink (2018), in his chapter summarizing the six Evangelical Protestant schools visited, described this "moral ecology":

"Our schools possessed several particular strengths in moral and civic formation. These advantages included a central focus on holistic student formation and a relatively tight-knit school community that provided an important collective identity, a set of commitments for students, and models of self-sacrifice and care for the needs of others. The schools were strongly mission-oriented, focusing on relationship-building with students to change their hearts and minds. (p. 93)"

There is a willingness, even an eagerness in those schools to confess faith in Jesus Christ, and to show love and grace to others as they have received from Jesus.

Hunter and Olson (2018) noted, though, that these two-week visits by outsiders are only the beginning of assessing formation, an opinion shared by Lickona (1998). What these recent researchers report is encouraging, but Hunter and Olson (2018) concluded,

*"The research presented here constitutes an initial effort to move decisively in this direction, to provide a richer and more intricate account of the factors involved in the moral and character formation of children. **This research begs to be unpacked further.**" (p. 246, emphasis added)*

This essay, our current research, and a subsequent article, where we will summarize our findings and make recommendations for ongoing research of spiritual formation in Christian schools, all pursue this unpacking.

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