



## Challenges to Faith-based Education Snapshot of the Literature<sup>1</sup>

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One of the challenges faced by Catholic schools is that of integrating students of other faiths while at the same time preserving the school's Catholic identity and engaging Catholic students in their religion. However, measuring and assessing the effects of strategies presents a challenge in itself. This literature brief has three purposes. First, it will attempt to provide a brief synopsis of relevant research on how young people engage with religious studies. Second, it will offer some possible direction on how such engagement might be measured. Finally, it will give some consideration to recent developments in the program evaluation literature, which may have some implications for faith-based educational program evaluation.

### *Students' experiences with religion*

As of yet, there are few extensive qualitative studies examining students' connection and experiences with religion in their immediate environment and on a societal level, as well as their views on religion in the school environment (Knauth & Kors, 2011). This is partly due to there being a lack of consensus on the conceptual meaning of religion and religious identity (Bertram-Troost, 2011). As a result, most of the existing studies are contextual, given that students' opinions within each site are highly dependent on a variety of other factors, such as culture or history. Furthermore, perceptions on religion can be attributed to influences of the media, the neighbourhood communities, school climate, personal character, as well as family and peers (Bertram-Troost, 2011; Hemming & Madge, 2011). For example, it was found that being surrounded by religious classmates had an effect on religiosity of other students, who then demonstrated less of a "decrease in their own religious behaviour and conformed to the norms of the school" (Barret, Pearson, Muller, & Frank, 2007). School status of certain students also appeared to play a role, with popular students who identified themselves as religious affecting other students in a similar way (Barret et al., 2007).

A study targeting European students found that young people generally viewed school as a place for religious learning rather than religious practice (see Knauth & Kors, 2011). For this reason, students saw school as a venue to obtain new knowledge of their own and other religion, and favoured the idea of a dialogical exchange of personal experiences and attitudes (Donlevy, 2006; Knauth & Kors, 2011).

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The schools struggling with integration of students of other faiths found that this dialogical approach was not in conflict with the Catholic ethos of community (Mifsud, 2010). In fact, students exposed to other forms of religion and culture saw this as beneficial, giving them an opportunity to practice the ethical values of compassion, understanding, and acceptance, contributing to a sense of “us together” rather than “us versus them” (Donlevy, 2006). This experience in turn served as an instrument in creating a link with social reality (Mifsud, 2010). As a result, some of the scholarly work on the subject calls for a more pluralistic curriculum that “gives space and creates links with the diversity of faith and culture in our society” (Mifsud 2010).

### *Measurement*

There is a growing body of research (e.g., Boyd & Lawson, 2004; Samdal et al, 1999) pointing to the value of student voice and asking students about their perceptions (Petty & Green, 2007). For schools considering such an approach, the subsequent challenge is determining how student engagement may be measured, given that influence of school strategies cannot be accurately separated from other factors.

Due to the complexity of the issue, some scholars propose using mixed-methods approaches to measure ‘religious engagement’ (Hemming & Madge, 2011). For example, quantitative tools such as ‘Opportunity to Learn’ questionnaires that look at process rather than outcome indicators could be used in combination with individual interviews or small focus group discussions. Since increase in faith cannot be easily measured, a self-report questionnaire would be tailored to examine whether students are given an opportunity to engage with religion or religious diversity, rather than rank the outcome of any specific strategy. Students would be given an extensive list of statements and would be asked to rate whether a particular statement applies to them (Petty & Green, 2007). Examples of such statements include “At school, I enhance my knowledge about my and other religions” or “Learning about different religions at school helps me reflect on my own” (Petty & Green, 2007).

In order to avoid misunderstanding, the questions must be structured in a clear and concise manner, with a great amount of attention paid to how the questions will be interpreted by the students (Bertram-Troost, 2011). Self-report questionnaires can be employed in a variety of ways, with there being at least 21 available instruments (see Institute for Education Science, 2011).

This method may then be followed by a pilot test where students could elaborate on their responses (Bertram-Troost, 2011). Where resources do not allow for in-depth qualitative methods, it may be possible for young people to act as co-researchers interviewing their peers, thus increasing their sense of agency (Hemming & Madge, 2011).



### *Program Evaluation*

A recent article by Jansen and Weibe (2010) explored the challenges associated with evaluating faith-based organizations and identified two major categories of challenges. The first pertained to challenges associated with research beliefs and philosophical understandings. The second category was challenges associated with research practice. The authors identified participatory approaches to inquiry as being most appropriate since they involve the direct participation of members of the faith-based community in implementing the evaluation. They also developed an evaluation framework to guide inquiry about faith-based organizations. The framework brings faith-based constructs to the forefront whereas they have usually been treated as contextual variables in relevant program evaluations. The framework appears in Appendix A. This sort of logic model can be quite useful in identifying relevant variables to measure and understanding their relationship to others. Suffice to say that systematic inquiry about faith-based programs and organizations is on the upswing.

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### Further Reading

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**APPENDIX A:** From Janzen & Wiebe (2010, p. 11)

