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Dr. Wilkins is decade long tenure as Headmaster of Oklahoma Bible Academy, a 113 year old secondary Christian school in Northwest Oklahoma. Prior to school ministry, Dr. Wilkins served as youth pastor for 15 years in two different Oklahoma Baptist churches. The inaugural EdD graduate from Dallas Theological Seminary, his research in the field of adolescent spiritual development. Married for twenty years to wife Sarah and has four daughters.

**Abstract**

This qualitative research study discovered insights into the adolescent spiritual development contributions of a Christian high school. By interviewing twenty-five alumni ages 25-30, the researcher sought insight on how the Christian school contribute to its students lived experience of spiritual development? The research analysis provided four overarching themes of: discipleship relationship network, foundation of bible and theological knowledge, immersed in a spiritual development culture, and Christian faith standards upheld. The findings were compared to three different faith development theories and affective domain learning theory. The study suggests implications for Christian schools and church youth ministries and programming.

# Significance of the Study

 Fifth century church bishop and theologian Tertullian tersely stated, “Christians are made not born.” Psalm 78 commands the Christian faith community to “tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power and wonders so that the next generation would know, trust and have loyal hearts to God” (Ps 78:3–6). John Westerhoff stated, faith cannot be given from one person to another, but it can be inspired from one to another.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Spiritual development is increasingly recognized as vital to human development, all the while research indicates spiritual development in the American adolescent population is decreasing significantly. Research regarding the spiritual development of America’s youth Christian spiritual development is disheartening. In modern American society adolescent spiritual development is decreasing. Gen Z identification with Christianity is plummeting and those identifying as religious “none’s” are skyrocketing.[[2]](#endnote-2) Generational sociologist Jean Twenge says, “Spiritual but not religious may have been true in the 2000s but no longer, iGen are less spiritual and less religious than previous generations. . . more young Americans are thoroughly secular, disconnecting completely from religion, spirituality, and larger questions of life”. Religious affiliation statistics plunged 25 percent from 1980–2015. In 2015, 22 percent of high school seniors said they never attend religious services. Church participation is decreasing significantly and more than ever, many are choosing not to belong to a religion. Twenge summarizes, “More young Americans are thoroughly secular, disconnecting completely from religion, spirituality, and larger questions of life. . .” [[3]](#endnote-3) Faith systems are now in the margins of society particularly for youth in the Western world.[[4]](#endnote-4) The researcher explored how the Christian school can be a counterculture influence on adolescent spiritual development. How does the Christian school contribute to its students lived experience of spiritual development?

The research question endeavors to explore how the Christian faith school community contributes to adolescent spiritual development. The research is significant as the Christian schools’ opportunity to contribute to adolescent spiritual development is increasing. A 2021 New York Times article states, “With public schools on the defensive, is this a blip or a ‘once-in-100-year moment’ for the growth of Christian education?”. The Times article attributes the growth to a revolt from parents against COVID pandemic procedures and curriculum awareness exposed during virtual learning.[[5]](#endnote-5) A year after the pandemic, in December 2022, the Cato Institute released survey results that 55 percent of private schools had an increase in enrollment and more applicants than available seats, as well as a significant increase in announcements of Protestant Christian schools.[[6]](#endnote-6)  Increasing Christian school enrollment, decreasing spiritual development in modern American culture, and its recognized increased importance provide a strong opportunity for Christian schools to contribute to adolescent spiritual development in its students.

The new student enrollment influx creates an opportunity to educate more students for the Christian school’s spiritual development and faith transmission. The research project was an exploration of how the educational environment practices influence adolescent spiritual development. The study sought to add empirical research literature on how the Christian school can contribute to adolescent spiritual development. The study revolved around discovering insights into the research question of the study: How does Christian high school contribute to the adolescent spiritual development of its students? A qualitative method of grounded theory with a theoretical sampling of Christian school alumni served as the research method. Findings, insights, and implications may be transferrable to other Christian schools and churches.

“Spiritual Development” is defined in the research as “the process of growing intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental ‘engine’ that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution that is shaped within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices”.[[7]](#endnote-7) Passing on the faith to younger generations is important to closed religious spiritual development organizations.

The subjective phenomenon of spiritual development is mysterious, challenging to quantifiably assess, yet is expected in the educational mission of the Christian school’s industry. Inspiring faith development is a complex endeavor. Education for spiritual development is a function of complex interchanges between school, family, congregations, and community.[[8]](#endnote-8) Faith transmission increases as traditions, beliefs, and valued practices are congruent between family, church, friends, schools, and community.

Because faith is deeply personal, dynamic, and subjective, qualitative research design is the best method to answer the research question.[[9]](#endnote-9) The sample of twenty-five alumni from the classes of 2008-2017. The study utilized young adults aged 25–30 for purposes of collecting quality retrospective data of meaning-making life experiences during Christian high school education. A retrospective study allows development processes from the interviewees’ present perspective.

**Literature Review Summary**

 The literature on adolescent spiritual development is complex. Adolescent spiritual development is an inseparable integration with human development domains, an array of theological perspectives, universal experiences, and the relative novelty of faith development theory to the human sciences. The phenomena are studied both as a universal open experience of making subjective meaning of life experiences and as meaning-making filtered and constructed through the established Christian perspective. Three faith development theories were critiqued in the study: James Fowler’s faith development theory[[10]](#endnote-10), John Westerhoff’s faith enculturation theory, and Todd Hall’s relational spirituality[[11]](#endnote-11). Krathwohl’s educational theory of affective learning domain theory was also included.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Adolescent spiritual or faith development theories contributed to the framework of this study. Each of the three faith development theories has incorporated psychosociological development theories into their faith development theory, which will be featured for their contribution to the holistic nature of adolescent spiritual development.

**Fowler Faith Development Theory**

The first theory to contribute to the study is James Fowler’s stage theory contributions, particularly his inclusion of formal operational thinking. Fowler’s seminal work in the field of faith development stages seeks to explain spiritual development by integrating established stage human development theories of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg. Fowler positions his faith development theory as a normative human development experience integrated with other stage development theories including adolescents. Fowler’s theory integrates neurophysiological dynamics of cognitive and emotional development, psychosocial experience, religious social influences.[[13]](#endnote-13)

According to Fowler, faith involves a vision of ultimates. An ultimate relationship with authoritative divine, self, others, and world synergize into a cogent ultimate reality. Faith forms powerful and long-lasting images of an order of meaning and value into a vision of the ultimate environment and who practitioners are and are becoming within the ultimate environment. Transformation in consciousness results from the recognition of self-others-world considering knowing the self as constituted by a center of value powerful enough to require or enable recentering one’s ultimate environment. It is a mode of knowing or acknowledgement that commits oneself and shapes one’s identity, loyalties, aspirations, and affections.[[14]](#endnote-14)Faith includes conscious and unconscious motivations.

Fowler’s theory involves a person’s progression of six faith maturation stages: intuitive-projective faith, mythic literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and finally universalizing faith. Fowler’s theory places adolescence in or on a continuum of stage 3 (synthetic-conventional) and stage 4 (individuate-reflective stage). In the synthetic-conventional stage, the worldview is lived and asserted but not yet reflected upon critically. The stage is dominantly defined by formal operational thinking of thinking in abstract concepts, self-reflexivity, and naming and synthesizing stories.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The individuative-reflective stage inaugurates with an interruption of external sources of authority. Transitions into this stage occur when an interrupted experience causes disequilibrium whose meaning must make sense within their existing worldview. In the individuative-reflective stage, assumed commitments of families and communities become critically examined and stories interpreted. Self becomes defined apart from relational others. Familial and traditional beliefs that endure critique or are formed during the individuative-reflective stage are held with more self-aware clarity, are thoughtfully interrelated, and are intentionally chosen.[[16]](#endnote-16)

 Fowler characterizes his six stages with new choices spurred on by life experiences, invitations for explicit awareness of and conscious responsibility for their beliefs and values. The third person perspective taking of internal and external voices creates conflict that must be resolved. Late adolescence stage 4 transitions into personal responsibility of one’s commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes. Transitioning from stage 3 to stage 4, one’s faith also shifts from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.[[17]](#endnote-17) The researcher sought to understand spiritual development of adolescents at a Christian school and therefore anticipated characteristics described in Fowler’s stage 3 and 4 as possible contributions to the study.

**Fowler faith development theory and cognitive development**

In a closed, tethered religious educational environment, cognitive processing development integrates with spiritual processing development. Cognitive processing develops in conjunction with biological brain development. Adolescents move into the fourth thinking stage of formal operation. Abstract concepts and ideals shape their perception of the world into a coherent system. Adolescents with new ability for formal operational thinking are seeking a reasonable transcendent view of the world that makes sense of their experiential reality.[[18]](#endnote-18)  One author describes adolescence as a period of ideological hunger that provokes devout commitments with resilient longevity, which is external until it becomes internalized as a new trusting foundation.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Formal operational thinking begins the developmental process of being able to reflectively think and imagine oneself in the past and future based on projected self-development.[[20]](#endnote-20) Howard Gardner comments on formal operational theory that ultimately, the individual is constructing a coherent story of the physical and social world.[[21]](#endnote-21) Literature implies that Christian faith development could increase in association with these discussed thinking developments during adolescence. When considering how adolescent spiritual development is nurtured, both the cognitive and spiritual processes must be increasingly developed. The formal operational stage suggests the new cognitive skills of adolescences can contribute to their spiritual development by incorporating religious propositional truth claims into their lives.

**Westerhoff’s faith enculturation styles theory**

The second theory to contribute to this study is John Westerhoff’s faith enculturation styles theory and his inclusion of social constructivist theory. John Westerhoff’s spiritual development theory matures in progressive styles of faith expansion as opposed to Fowler’s stages. Westerhoff illustrates the theory by comparing faith development to a tree which continues to expand gradually and in an orderly way if in the proper environment. Contrary to Fowler’s view of a linear circular progression of faith development, Westerhoff’s progression is a concentric rings expansion similar to how rings on a tree indicate development. first style is experienced faith, second is affiliative faith, third is searching faith, and finally owned faith. Each style is whole and complete. Experienced faith is the foundation. It begins not with theological treatise but affective experiences. Faith language learning correlates with people’s experiences attached to those words. Westerhoff’s theory of faith styles relies heavily upon relationships based on pre-rationed intuitional thinking and knowing. Intellectually thinking is not discounted but it is not esteemed above the intuitive[[22]](#endnote-22)

Westerhoff juxtaposes two ways of consciousness for humans. The intellectual focuses on the abstract and universal characterized by verbal, linear, conceptual, and analytical activities. The other is intuitive and focuses on the syncretic and the experiential. Intuitive is characterized by nonverbal, creative, nonlinear, relational activities. Spiritual development flourishes with an integration and growth of both types of consciousness.[[23]](#endnote-23) Congruent interaction of word and deed influences the proper environment for one’s experiential faith style to develop.

Typically, high school students, if their experiential faith needs are met, will grow to affiliative faith style. Affiliative faith is belonging to a faith community with one’s dominant affections acting to internalize the faith of the authoritative community. Westerhoff describes spiritual development as a natural intentional process of enculturation into a faith community’s culture of understanding and ways of life, their worldview (perceptions of reality), and their ethos (values and ways of life). These faith community’s culture is transmitted to the next generation. The internalization of the community’s authoritative story shaping identity is the final characteristic.

Searching faith is characterized with doubt or critical judgement along with alternative experimentation of other traditions and endeavors to commit. Continuing to belong to the faith community is critical during the faith style of searching. Owned faith is referred to as a conversion that involves a total personal identity change of thinking, feeling, and willing.[[24]](#endnote-24) Westerhoff sees late adolescents’ spiritual development being nurtured into a faith that only then experiences illumination, certainty, and identity. A story is at the heart of the Christian faith, and therefore the heart of Christian education is that same story: “Our children will have faith if we are faithing together faithfully”.[[25]](#endnote-25) The researcher sought to understand spiritual development of adolescents at a Christian school. Therefore, he relied on the characteristics described in Westerhoff’s affiliative and searching faith styles as possible contributions to the study.

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### **Integration with Social Development Theory**

Adolescents want to know what is happening around them and how it is influencing them to better understand themselves. Engaging in self-reflexivity of personal subjective experiences is crucial for personal self-guided transformation to move the meaningful center of life to become known and enjoyed. Adolescent development features of cognitive development, relational awareness, and communities of belonging are inseparable from adolescent spiritual development.

Adolescent researcher, Chap Clark, describes the lack of supportive relationships as a “systematic abandonment” of adolescence in modern American culture.[[26]](#endnote-26) Recent spiritual development theories and research highlight the role social influences have in shaping spiritual development. Development is the complex ongoing change of both intrapersonal and interpersonal transactions in a society with ever changing circumstances. Due to being socially overstimulated but relationally under supported, erratic identity development hinders community formation.[[27]](#endnote-27) Westerhoff highlights the need for guiding spiritual development role model relationships to progress an adolescent from a searching faith to an owned faith style. Powell’s adolescent research encourages faith enculturating communities to embrace the 5 to 1 relational need for an adolescent’s support system

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### Adolescent Style

Westerhoff celebrates a cooperative self-agency of the adolescents in their own spiritual development process. The self is inseparable from its relationships. A basic need is for the adolescent faith to be nourished and belong to a faithful community, owning its own story as theirs.[[28]](#endnote-28) Adolescents follow the reflective way of searching and finding meaning and purpose. Meaning-making is a combination of reflected experience and the community’s authoritative story. Adolescents live in a tension of individuation and vulnerable intimacy within the faith community. Testing occurs as they internalize and reshape the community’s traditions.

Westerhoff refers to this style of faith maturation as affiliative faith when the intuitive consciousness and affections of the adherent become fully inculcated. Spiritual development matures as the implicit experiential knowledge of God unites with the explicit words of the gospel and the intuitive knowledge of lived experience, then imaging stories unite with conceptual language.[[29]](#endnote-29)Intellectual and intuitive knowing combines with contemplation and action in a complex paradoxical world.

Education that instills the Christian faith should encourage sharing of life and opportunity for reflection on the meaning and significance of life. Interactions of storytelling, shared experiences, celebrations, action and reflection, and role models of ‘faithing selves” within a community nourishes faith transmission, sustainment, and expansion[[30]](#endnote-30)

Programming that contributes to adolescent spiritual development involves community-oriented experiences, such as activities where students and teachers are interactively involved eating together, praying and singing together, and thinking and reading together.[[31]](#endnote-31) Students can download top notch preaching but they cannot download authentic community.[[32]](#endnote-32) Interactive shared learning experiences increase learner personal development. Christian school environment allows for ample opportunity for adult and student to be involved in shared experiences. Instructional methods that bless the struggle and questioning process as a byproduct of adolescent cognitive and social identity development are encouraged. Private and group questioning is important to adolescent spiritual development. Seven out of ten adolescents have honest questioning, doubts, struggles, and an educational environment without fear to contribute to adolescent spiritual development[[33]](#endnote-33). Fowler’s stage four critical reflections prompt critical questioning. Questioning is an important process to individuate owned faith internalization.

**Hall’s relational spirituality theory**

The final theory contribution is the most recent from Todd Hall’s relational spirituality phases theory. Relational spirituality incorporates implicit knowledge and attachment theory into his spiritual development theory. Relational spirituality is a distinctly Christian view of spiritual development. Relational spiritual development theory incorporates trinitarian theology, attachment theory, emotional theory, and the latest interpersonal neurobiology.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Relational spirituality presents one unified idea that human beings are fundamentally relational, reflecting the intrinsic relational nature of the triune God. Relationships are primary to human experience. People are perpetually in relationship to themselves, others, God, and his creation.  The research study explored the intrinsically relational communities of Christian schools and how relationships contribute to adolescent spiritual development.

### **Relational Spirituality Theory’s Integration of Attachment Theory**

Relational spirituality integrates with the psychological field of secure attachment theory. Hall writes, “An attachment relationship is a particular kind of relationship, a deep connection between a caregiver or attachment figure such as a parent and someone on the receiving end of that care such as a child”[[35]](#endnote-35) The deeply connected relationship provides children with their prewired need for physical and emotional security and a haven.

Research has identified four primary attachment categories: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful[[36]](#endnote-36). Secure attachment filters implicitly believe that emotionally significant others will be available and responsive when needed. They have developed automatic self-regulating emotions. Preoccupied attachment filters struggle to regulate emotions due to their easily accessed negative memories and negative relationship schema. They have an organized plan for self-regulation but get hijacked by hyperactive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of their negative past experiences. Dismissive attachment filters do not expect consistent availability or responsiveness. Dismissive brains disengage and become emotionally distant with significant relationships. Fearful attachments want close relationships but avoid them. They need significant comfort and reassurance from others. A painful dissonance of gut level knowledge of rejection and desired intimacy causes them to avoid seeking support from attachment figures. The emerging evidence is that insecure attachments hinder, and secure attachment fosters people’s capacity to fulfill the great commandment of loving God and loving others in growing and loving presence.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Attachment filters influence one’s experience of the loving presence of God. Attachment research recognizes that God fits their definition of an attachment figure. Secure attachment individuals experience their relationship with God in the same way they experience their human relationships. Insecure attachment individuals turn away from God during distress while secure attachments usually turn toward God during distress. Implicit relational patterns with God and human attachment figures parallel each other. Doubting, questioning, and examining beliefs and integrating negative life experiences are healthy attributes of a secure attachment relationship with God. Fearful attachments keep God and the spiritual community at arm’s length. Meaningful relationships with spiritual mentors, formally or informally, become attachment figures and influence implicit knowledge of God. Spiritual mentor authoritative attachment figures influence others through modeling their own relationship with God and spiritual life. Their modeled attachment to God may predict the mentee’s relationship with God[[38]](#endnote-38) The Scriptures provide an image of secure familial attachment filters when believers are encouraged to cry out to God as Abba, Father, because he cares and is ever present help in times of trouble.

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### **Relational Spirituality Phases of Spiritual Development**

Hall proposes a four-phase process of spiritual development: preparation, incubation, illumination, and interpretation. The preparation phase starts with explicit processing involved in head knowledge or ideas that shape one’s experiences. The incubation phase moves to the gut level reflecting process in the background of the mind and soul engaging with relational experiences and attachment filters for new connections, expectations, and meaning of life experiences. In the illumination phase, tipping points make themselves known, which transforming their attachment filters and ability to love. A new meaning emerges in clear conscious awareness.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Youth ministry programming can incorporate activates for Hall’s phases. A cycle of programming that involves information, experience, reflection, and community sharing is suggested for spiritual development. Spiritual development programming involves repetitive active experiences. Contemplating practices of prayer and Scripture meditation can drive explicit knowledge of God into an incubation phase to influence the relational spiritual paradigm toward illumination. Storytelling is a powerful referential activity, particularly stories of suffering. Suffering causes disruption, disorientation, or disequilibrium between implicit and explicit beliefs about reality. Suffering facilitates opportunities for increased integration of explicit and implicit knowledge into more complex, authentic interpretation of reality. Suffering is painful to existing implicit structures but provides a window of opportunity for a new robust implicit structure to emerge[[40]](#endnote-40). Referential activities link feelings and words Linking feelings and words is central for healthy functioning of ASD phases processing. Reflective contemplative knowing God is essential to spiritual development.

Literature supports faith conversations. In a stratified in-depth interview of 215 parents’ variety of religious backgrounds, Smith and Adamcyk explain why conversations are so crucial to faith transformation. A potential transferable finding is that regular faith conversations as a part of everyday teachable life moments contribute significantly to spiritual development. Conversations that are authentic, regular, and applicable have a strong accumulative influential effect. Regular, natural conversations allow parents to simultaneously direct and ask for a self-reflexive response. Self-reflexive adolescents are most likely to authentically adopt their parents’ faith as their own identity. Self-reflexivity skills developed by parent’s religious conversations and modeling are significant influencers of religious intergenerational transmission.[[41]](#endnote-41)

By integrating all three faith development theories, a successful adolescent spiritual development process is described as the Christian faith owned, explicitly known, internalized, characterized, and lovingly relational. The spiritually mature student embraces his or her personal story in the biblical story of a shared experiential faith community. The literature suggests that a Christian school can contribute to the adolescent spiritual development primarily through adult to student relationships characterized by appropriate vulnerability, authentic trust, pastoral biblical storytelling, wisdom, and living models of the Christian faith. Interactive spiritual activities and shared lived experiences accompanied with explicit storytelling processing, encased within these relationships, can spur on spiritual development.

**Research Method**

 The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study on adolescent spiritual development was to discover insights into how a Christian school contributes to their high school student’s spiritual development. The semi structured interviewed participants were a theoretical convenient sampling of twenty-five 2008–2018’graduates. The research analysis began with annotations being made on the interview outline for each individual interview at the time of and immediately after conducting the interviews. The researcher transcribed the interviews using the transcription service by NVivo software. The researcher listened to the recorded interviews and edited the software transcription to remove the researcher’s portions and data transcription accuracy. Each case file data document was then read for the purpose of clarity of understanding the content relevant to the inquiry. The transcripts were emailed to the participants for verification. The researcher first queried the data files with word frequencies then analyzed with line-by-line and paragraph open coding. Axial coding began once the researcher completed the open-coding process. The researcher reviewed interview notes, NVivo generated codebook, and code references analyzing for grouping codes into categories and subcategories. The annotated interview scripts were critiqued against all the open and axial coding. Finally, selective coding was aggregated into the four overarching themes generated inductively from the data. Each individual data case document was reread with annotations for comparative verification against the emerged themes and subthemes prior to the results write up. The participants then verified the validity of the themes.

# **Participants Demographics**

Table 1

Demographic Survey Results

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Survey Question  | Result  |
| 1. Gender
 | Male 14Female 11  |
| 1. Graduation Year
 | Year Number 2009 2 2010 2 2011 3 2012 2  2013 2  2014 1  2015 6 2016 3  2017 1  2018 3  |
| 1. Years in Christian High School
 | Number Years 22/25 4  3/25 3  |
| 1. Did experience the spiritual development phenomenon in high school?
 | Number Percentage  25/25 100% |
| 1. Which spiritual development program most helped you develop spiritually:

Bible class, chapel, retreats,advisory/small groups?  | Program Number PercentageBible Class 21/25 84% chapel 1/25 4% Advisory/ 3/25 12% Small Groups  |
| 1. What teacher or coach relationship contributed most to your spiritual development?
 | Teacher NumberTeacher A 16/25 Teacher B 4/25 5 Other Teachers 1 |
| 1. How many times per month did your family attend church while you were an OBA high school student?
 | Frequency Number Percentage 5 15/25 60%  4 9/25 36%  2 1/25 4% |
| 1. How many times per month do you attend church currently?
 | Frequency Number Percentage 5 9/25 36%  4 9/25 36%  3 2/25 8%  2 2/25 8%  1 3/25 12%  |

The demographic survey contributes to understanding the sample population. Demographic survey question 1 collected participant gender data. Male participants outnumbered female participants 14 to 11. The male perspective may have been overrepresented in the sample population. Because nine of the twenty-five participants graduated in 2015 and 2016, the Christian school spiritual development dynamics during the years of 2014 and 2015 made a significant influence upon the reflective perspective of the participants’ spiritual development in high school. The sample population had meaningful experience with spiritual development and all the participants experienced the researched phenomena of adolescent spiritual development. Demographic survey question 5 collected data on which spiritual development program contributed the most to the participants’ spiritual development. Bible class facilitated spiritual development significantly greater than the other survey options.

Demographic survey question 7 reveals that 96 percent of participants attended church four or five times per month which strongly indicates that the family background included a strong Christian faith commitment. This study sought to gain insight into how the Christian school provided or contributed to adolescent spiritual development, but it also recognized that family and church involvement were powerful variables to adolescent spiritual development.

Question 8 of the demographic survey collected data on current church attendance of the participants at survey completion. Present church attendance of four and five times per month was 36 percent totaling 72 percent of the participants. Participant church attendance of two or three times per month was 16 percent. The remaining 12 percent attended once per month. The current participant average attendance of participants was 3.76, slightly less than in high school.

**Research Findings**

The twenty-five interviews generated four overarching themes that are listed in by highest reference frequency to lowest. Each overarching selective themes on the left column have their accompanying subthemes listed on the right column of axial categories.

Table 2

Aggregated Coding Frequency

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Selective Themes  | Axial Categories  |
| 1. Oklahoma Bible Academy contributed to adolescent spiritual development by providing a relationship network of passionate, vulnerable, example setting teacher mentors and spiritual development priority peer friendships.

25 sources, 625 references  | 1. Teachers as Christian Examples – 25 sources, 411 references.
2. Teachers as Mentors 22 sources, 65 references
3. Friendships – 25 sources, 153 references
4. Accountability- 17 sources, 40 references
 |
| 1. Oklahoma Bible Academy contributed to spiritual development by developing a firm Bible knowledge foundation through the teacher’s contagious passion, self-discovery Bible study presentation projects, debates, Scripture memory, apologetics, and relevant life application.

25 sources, 527 References  | 1. Bible Knowledge - 25 sources, 200 references
2. Discussions – 25 sources, 141 references
3. Challenged for faith ownership- 15 sources, 22 references.
4. Referential Activities – 13 sources, 15 references
 |
| 1. Oklahoma Bible Academy contributed to spiritual development by being an educational environment that is saturated with the priority of Christian spiritual development in all programs by all personnel.

25 Sources, 316 References  | 1. Regular priority- 25 sources, 158 references
2. Biblical integration perspective- 23 sources, 54 references
3. Daily Bible class – 23 sources, 53 references
4. Perpetually Encouraged- 13 sources, 20 references
 |
| 1. Oklahoma Bible Academy contributes to spiritual development when biblical authority governs standards for internal school culture operations and external culture engagement.

25 sources, 273 References   | 1. Accountability to Standards- 22 sources, 61 referenced
2. Worldview Comparison-14 sources, 22 references
3. Discipline-14 sources, 18 references.
4. Interpreting Life and Culture – 12 sources, 18 references
5. Skilled Instructors – 4 sources, 7 references
 |

The concept map below illustrates the relationship analysis of the codes. Figure 4 aids readers in tracing the researcher’s inductive data analysis process. The dark blue circle in the middle is the research question: How does Christian school contribute to adolescent spiritual development? The four boxes coming from the circle in the darker red shades are the subjects of the four selected themes: (1) relationships network, (2) faith internalization activities, (3) saturate educational environment, and (4) biblical authority. The second outer layer from the center are the ten axial coding categories that contributed to the selected themes: Bible knowledge, discussion, referential activities, culture engagement, internal operations standards, teachers, faith-aligned friendships, regular spiritual priority, biblical integration, and perpetual spiritual development encouragement. The third layer from center are the twenty open codes that contribute to the axial categories: life application, self-study projects, debate, questions, outside classroom interactions, praise and worship, reflective writing, challenges, service/mission trip/leadership projects, worldview comparison, biblical integration, interpreting life and culture, accountability, skilled teachers, mentors, personal care, living examples, chapel, prayer, and all faculty/all programs. The analysis process began with the open-coded, third outer layer and merged into the second outer layer axial categories. The categories were then selected into the four generated themes.

 

The qualitative content analysis produced four overarching selective themes.

**The first theme is that Oklahoma Bible Academy contributed to adolescent spiritual development by providing a relationship network of passionate, vulnerable, example setting teacher mentors and spiritual development priority peer friendships.**

In the data, relationships emerged as the most significant contributor theme to ASD in the Christian school environment. All participants expressed a significant influence of the Christian school teachers on their spiritual development. A trusting teacher relationship functioning in a mentorship capacity is the best conduit for spiritual development, according to the sample. Teachers being appropriately vulnerable with story sharing and humility influenced student spiritual development.

Table 4

Terms Used to Communicate Vulnerability

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Term | Sources | References | Term | Sources | References |
| Openness | 18 | 34 | Authentic | 12 | 20 |
| Teacher Sharing | 21 | 30 | Always available | 14 | 18 |
| Deeper | 12 | 25 | Humanized | 10 | 11 |
| Vulnerable | 11 | 22 | Genuine | 6 | 10 |

The participants communicated the value of vulnerability in Table 4. A participant recalled, “I specifically remember seeing Teacher C cry in chapel. And so that was huge for me to see that this school, this method of education, this focus on spiritual development, is not just about the students who, like these teachers, are real people with hearts for Jesus and can be moved to tears also.” A participant also stated, “Their life stories were massively valuable, and that’s part of the reason why so much of teacher B stands out to me is I feel like he was so real with us.” A participant stated, “Hearing my math teacher’s testimony was huge and I considered that when the salvation actually occurred.” Another participant reflected, “I thought that was super helpful growing. And so, you look for your teachers or your other mentors to do that. And it made them seem more real, like they are real people, not just teachers. It made the relationship connection more likable and wanting to listen to them a little bit deeper.”

Teachers contributed to spiritual development by modeling Christian character traits of patience, kindness, perseverance, humility, compassion, wisdom, truth, and self-sacrificing availability. Teachers modeled Christian character observed by the students. Their verbalized character trait data files and references are charted below:

Table 3

Verbalized Character Trait Data Files and References

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Character Trait | Sources | References | Character Trait | Sources | References |
| Discipline  | 14 | 18 | Trustworthy  | 9 | 10  |
| Self-sacrifice  | 9 | 14 | Wisdom  | 6 | 8  |
| Loving  | 8 | 13 | Humility  | 4 | 6  |
| Patience  | 7 | 11 | Joy  | 5 | 5  |
| Compassion  | 6 | 10 | Respect  | 5 | 5  |
| Faithfulness  | 8 | 10 | Boldness  | 3 | 4  |
| Kindness  | 7 | 10 | Honest  | 2 | 2  |

Some of the interviewees colorfully narrated the contribution of teacher’s modeled Christian character traits. A participant reflected upon a Teacher A: “. . . he just always was so joyful and so kind, but to me that was just like a shining example of Christ his relationship with Christ and character traits of patience and graciousness inspired my faith.” A participant articulated, “Humility is a big one. As someone who struggles with humility. And so, seeing people do be humble, I am like, okay, I want to be that way.” A participant observed,

Love, patience, too. I mean, I do not know if there was ever a moment where I could remember an OBA teacher even getting on the edge, there is just that that patience that you do not see everywhere. And then just the love. I mean, you can tell they genuinely care about you even when it’s hard.

A participant recalled a specific teacher how “she loved us so well and she had so much grace and so much compassion. She showed a passion, faithfulness, and discipline toward the Lord. And saw love and purpose.” Finally, a student said, “I do not think I ever had a teacher that was not willing to meet me at a specified time to assist in any way. And that kind of servitude is different.”

 Friendships relationships were also an important contributor to spiritual development. Faith influenced meaning-making discussions and accountability, particularly in spontaneous settings, were particularly influential. Faith life discussions with peers carried significant weight to the participants.

Vitality of relational discipleship network affirmed. Westerhoff's theory of enculturation and Hall’s theory of relational spirituality is affirmed. Christian theological doctrine of man’s intrinsic relational nature and spiritual development even in a school context is intrinsically and indispensably relational[[42]](#endnote-42).The research extends Hall’s incorporation of attachment theory to Christian school teachers as well. The significance Christian mentorship during disequilibrium life experiences. The research revealed friendship are more significant than the literature suggests.

**The second generated theme: Oklahoma Bible Academy contributes to spiritual development with Bible class learning activities for intentional faith internalization through biblical theological knowledge, faith question-oriented discussions, corrective discipline, and referential activities.**

*“There was always talk of application in the modern context, but it was rarely ever talked about in isolation from clear scripture interpretation. And teachers did a good job of bringing those things to the forefront in terms of bringing them to life and making them real. The Bible never felt disconnected or distant.”*

The demographic and qualitative data revealed that Bible class is the environment most significant to adolescent spiritual development in the Christian high school learning context. Learning dynamics that influenced spiritual development in Bible class were teachers’ contagious passion, self-discovery Bible study presentation projects, debates, Scripture memory, apologetics, and relevant life application. Participants did not bifurcate biblical and theological knowledge as distinct from spiritual development. The knowledge and spiritual development were symbiotic processes. *“Really good personal quiet time journaling and at reflective discussion activities for Bible study that forced us to really dig deeply into our own life story and beliefs and how to apply it in our own spiritual context. At OBA, those faith things played a big role in what led me to realize that I wanted to not just have my pinky toe in the water, but dive all in and give Jesus my life.”*

Student driven questions and discussions were influential to spiritual development as well as corrective conversations from teachers and friends. Referential spiritual habit activities of praise and worship, prayer, personal faith internalization reflective writing activities contributed to high school student spiritual development. Christian high school contributes to an internalized faith spiritual development by challenging students with a biblical perspective critique of relevant controversial topics, spiritual leadership opportunities, tangible service projects, and mission trips.

Theme two affirms Christian spiritual development that is aligned with biblical teaching does occur in the life of adolescence and the value of biblical literacy and theological knowledge contributes to the spiritual development process. Christian schools can plan and program intentional learning activities that aid’s students’ progress through Krathwohl’s internalization taxonomy. Referential activities and higher order thinking skills can facilitate Fowler’s individuate reflective stage progression.

**The third theme is that Oklahoma Bible Academy contributes to spiritual development by being an educational environment that is saturated with the priority of Christian spiritual development in all programs by all personnel**. School programs and courses encourage spiritual development with routine planned prayer, opportune discussions, weekly chapels, and daily Bible classes. The school environment contributed to spiritual development when spiritual development conversations frequently occurred as a normal, regular topic interwoven into conversations with all personnel. “the faculty’s primary focus was to teach us the gospel. And then that was integrated into whatever else they were teaching.” “And just honestly I got to hear the gospel over and over for the first time and consistently.” Biblical integration in non-Bible courses is strongly affirmed as facilitating spiritual development. Christian reflection in non-Bible courses is particularly potent for adolescent spiritual development in the high school.

The participants indicated that the continual, incremental spiritual development practices and encouragements had a compounding cumulative influence upon them as students. Faith learning was not compartmentalized just to chapel or Bible class but was integrated into every course, every personnel, and every extracurricular. “Spiritual development was the overall feel. It’s importance was somehow imprinted on me. So my relationships with my friends, being known, being cared for by teachers. And then the physical, very tangible, focuses on spiritual growth in Bible class and chapel.” The wholistic incorporation of faith contributed to deeper internalization and less faith life compartmentalization.

**Theme four is that Oklahoma Bible Academy contributes to spiritual development when biblical authority governs standards for internal school culture operations and external culture engagement.**

Participants attributed the Christian faith standards for determining acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and codes of conduct standards for students and school personnel and the accountability to those standards as influential. created an environment where behavior that was not conducive just really was not acceptable.” “Teacher G corrected us and held firm boundaries. . . but she loved us so well. And she had so much grace and so much compassion.”

“Students couldn't really get away with stuff, but you still knew that the faculty cared about you. They modeled you can be a loving person and not compromise right and wrong.”

The Christian high school contributes to spiritual development by exposing and critiquing popular culture and other world views’ answers to life’s ultimate questions against a biblical perspective. Critiquing culture and comparing worldviews against biblical teaching of truth claims, ethics and morality standards was undervalued in the literature.

 A consistency of biblical application amongst the school operations helped provided a cohesive systematic operating system for students. Students being trained to discern cultural values by critiquing entertainment messages aided spiritual development. The participants were grateful for the foundation of biblical Christian spiritual development they internalized during their high school years.

The research affirmed the value of meaningful mentor relationships with teachers and added further insights into the mentor relationship. New insight was discovered as to the importance of faith-aligned friendship to spiritual development. The findings affirmed the value of the Christian Scripture as the organizing story to creating meaning from life experiences. The findings added new insights into the types of learning activities that promote faith internalization. The findings also emphasized the priority of Christian spiritual development being saturated in all programs by all personnel. Biblical integration in all subject matters and consistent enculturation provides a coherent, organizing life operating system. The findings verified the Christian school serves as an authoritative community to students. The research also contributed new insight that exposure to other belief systems and cultural discernment is significant to spiritual development.

The research findings also offered Christian school’s practical implications to improve spiritual development. The research findings suggested several practical implications for Christian school administrators, Christian school teachers, and classroom Bible teachers. The spiritual development priority needs to be clearly communicated and celebrated. All personnel processes need to support the spiritual development priority. Teachers’ influence by planning routines and rhythms for biblical integration, biblical integration discussions, and spiritual habits such as prayer. Teachers establish curriculum materials with appropriate worldview comparison exposure and implement corrective discipline. Bible classrooms were particularly influential therefore maximized for spiritual development. The passion of the Bible teacher needs to be contagious. Higher order critical thinking learning activities and clear relevancy need to incorporate into Bible teaching.

The themes are suggested to be transferable to the church youth ministry and parachurch ministry context. The role of relationships in the faith community as well as the intentional learning activities to promote faith internalization is relevant to church ministry context. The findings of example setting, question and answer discussion, faith saturation, and aligned operational standards are suggested to be transferable to the church context. Further research is suggested regarding student/teacher mentor relationship components, facilitating faith friendship discussions, discipline that provokes discipleship, competing worldview exposure, generational culture influencers, and with those who disengaged from spiritual development after high school. This research project is helpful to those seeking to influence adolescents’ progression in Christian spiritual development.

The figure below illustrates the layers of the foundation that adolescent spiritual development is built upon.



**Unexpected Insights and Discoveries:**

 **-**Dominance of relationship of modeling and mentoring over content delivery.

 -Significance of teachers’ authentic vulnerability storytelling.

 -One on one conversations during life challenge influences more than upfront teaching.

 -Significance of the spontaneous faith conversations amongst friends.

 -Students perception of teacher availability outside of class period.

 -Significance of biblical integration in non bible courses: math, science, English.

 -Cumulative effect of habitual Christian practices.

 -Significance of the observed teacher’s personal discipline.

 -Accountability and corrective discipline to Christian standards of behavior.

 -Non-Christian worldviews exposure and critique.

 -Normal begets normal not boredom.

**Researcher’s spiritual development adjustments**

 **-**Advisory groups of peers with mentor teacher and utilization of John Stonestreet book “A practical guide to Culture”.

 -Bible classes have a questions box for students to place anonymously.

 -Chapel: Decreased upfront guest speakers, Increased student led worship and teacher/student storytelling.

 -Training teachers in the character traits and mentoring methods.

 -Increase think, pair, share discussion activities.

 -Bible class memory verse learning includes a relevancy reflection activity.

**Suggested Practical Implication for Youth Ministry**

**Finding #1 Relationship Network of Models and Mentors**

 The research provides insight to the priorities of youth pastors and those who work to disciple high school students. The research informs hiring and recruiting qualities for youth ministry leadership. The role of being model, an example, of a faithful comprehensive and coherent Christian. From the student’s perspective, the disciplemaker role as a personal mentor was significant. The charismatic upfront teacher/leader is not as influential as the vulnerable individual pastoral guide. Adults who influence high school student spiritual development are models and mentors.

 The relationship with adults are personally professional. The value of vulnerability, authenticity and openness is increasing. The professional component of value of foundation bible and theology teaching. The stereotype of an effective disciple maker shifting from the fun energetic culturally current camp counselor to a discerning listener overflowing with biblical wisdom. Spontaneous conversations in the margin can be more influential than the planned program. The research indicates that the primary value of youth ministry programming is its effectiveness as a platform for relational modeling and mentoring.

**Finding #2 Bible knowledge symbiotic with Spiritual development**

 *Bible and theological knowledge that transforms students is an active engaging involvement, reflective, relevant and includes riveting story.* Youth disciplemakers increase their skills of facilitating meaningful Christian habit, traditions, expression experiences more so than highly relatable sage on the stage performer. Contributive bible study leaders will be facilitators of Q and A, group discussions coherent life experiences. Training in facilitating reflection and referential activities that encourage students to express their faith life and creating platforms for faith based friendship conversations may promote discipleship. Facilitating learning activities that engage students in active direct scripture interaction than a passive listening activity.

 *Critical thinking learning activities* contributed to faith development of high school students. Discovering, planning, and facilitating critical thinking learning activities would aid youth pastor in discipleship. Training for critical thinking facilitation and curriculum selection may help effectiveness of youth pastors.

 *Finally, the art of storytelling is worth developing in youth disciplemakers*. Stories of all shapes and sizes seem to influence spiritual development. Personal stories, illustrative stories, biblical stories, the biblical metanarrative story all engage both the heart and mind of the high school students. Teaching systematic theology, rational apologetics, and substantive expositional bible teaching is valuable but it’s contribution to spiritual development is limited compared to storytelling. A pluralistic post Christian generation indicates they want an apologetic (story) that make coherent sense of their complex lived experiences more so than winning a philosophical debate.

**Finding #3 Regular, normal and all the time.**

 In youth ministry, novelty is valuable. The research suggests that regular, consistent, normal, meaningful Christian rhythms and rituals are valuable as well. The compounding effect of regular spiritual development habits within a youth ministry context should not be underestimated.

**Finding #4 Discipline for discipleship**

Disciplining students in youth ministry is challenging. Correction and rebuking can be quite uncomfortable for students. The research surprisingly suggests that upholding biblical standards of behavior including accountability and correction can be catalysts for discipleship.

Youth ministry leaders skills in managing students behavior can reinforce the internalization of Christian values and behaviors.

**Finding #5 Critiquing external culture honestly.**

 Generation is a majority, minority, pluralistic population. A culture critique needs to be an honest representation of their classmates and neighbors’ religious doctrines, traditions, and faith expressions. Youth ministry needs to both be real and full of grace about the complexity of culture engagement while remember Christian have a final authority of truth to adhere.

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