



Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools



This report is authored by Christian Schools Australia (CSA). It shares findings from collaborative research undertaken by researchers from Research Schools International, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard and Christian Schools Australia.

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CSA would like to sincerely thank both of the project partners (right):



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A word from the Australian Research Project Coordinator:

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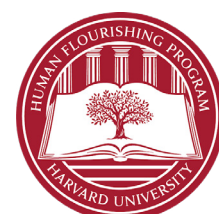
Dr Darren Iselin, Director of Research and Innovation, Christian Schools Australia

Cultivating Student Flourishing in Your School Community

Researchers from RSI and Harvard can support your school to use these findings to further support flourishing

This project uncovers compelling findings about student flourishing that have important implications for practice. The research team from Research Schools International (RSI) and Harvard is offering a program of professional development to support schools to implement evidence-based practices that target areas for growth at your school identified by this research. This collaborative work will serve to further support student flourishing at your school.

If you are interested in learning more about how to create practical impact in your school based on this research, please fill out the expression of interest form by scanning the QR code.



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SCHOOLS
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Foreward

The “*Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools*” study, in partnership with researchers from Research Schools International (RSI) and the Human Flourishing Program (HFH) at Harvard University, is the latest research project undertaken by Christian Schools Australia (CSA). The research project is a capstone project completing a body of research that began in 2017. This latest addition to the corpus of Christian research sits amongst 6 other projects looking at the benefits of Christian education in CSA member schools.

At the heart of the body of research are two questions:

- » Do Christian schools make a positive impact on the formation of young people?
- » If so, how is this being facilitated?

In 2017, this journey began by looking at the power of relationships. The results showed a striking correlation between the relational health and wellbeing of students and thriving relationships with their peers and teachers. In 2018, CSA sought to explore the question of how schools flourish and whether a road map existed to help institutions adopt empirically based practices and approaches to bring about institution-wide flourishing. In 2019–20, CSA explored the characteristics of school workforces, including staff resilience and its connection to student outcomes. In 2020, one of the most comprehensive research projects of its kind, “*Australian Schools and the Common Good*” was undertaken to assess holistically the outcomes of graduates and their active and meaningful engagement with and for society. Across 2021–23, CSA undertook longitudinal studies into the perspectives of Christian school parents and the motivating factors that drew them to faith-based education, including: values, spirituality, engagement, decision-making, satisfaction, and personal perceptions. Further research, in 2021–22, was targeted to parents from a church background with CSA’s inclusion of bespoke questions in the National Church Life Survey.

The previous research findings and learnings have helped refine and improve the questions CSA has been asking about Christian education and the tools we have employed to validate our understanding of what truly makes a difference to the flourishing of young people. To this end, CSA, engaged researchers from RSI and HFH as its research partners in this capstone project: *Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools*. The Human Flourishing Program’s Flourishing Index and validated Flourishing Survey Tool were utilised within this large-scale, national project which also tied together eight years of research on and for Christian schools by CSA. The ability for CSA to refine existing questions and target specific Christian education practices and approaches, contextualise the adolescent survey instrument to align closely with the Australian Christian schooling context and practices.

My hope is, that in this report, the reader is able to develop a holistic understanding of adolescent flourishing, beyond mental and physical health, but more broadly to encompass general wellbeing, happiness, relational connection, character, meaning, and ultimately purpose. It is also hoped that these findings will provide greater insights into the significant journey that young people go through as they navigate adolescence, filled with its diverse range of challenges and expectations. Ultimately, my hope is the reader will develop an understanding of both the evidence-based practices and, specifically, the Christian practices which positively impact the flourishing of students in schools.

School communities who are highly intentional in their application of the evidenced-based practices contained in this report have the opportunity to develop an approach which creates a flourishing network of care and support for young people in their community. The findings of this report, if applied well, have the ability to ensure school practices and policies not only align with the science of flourishing, but more importantly promote the approaches which best facilitate student flourishing during students’ formative adolescent years.

Dr Daniel Pampuch, Chief Executive Officer, Christian Schools Australia

Executive Summary

Flourishing is a concept that incorporates general wellbeing, happiness, purpose, meaning, relational connection, character, and overall mental and physical health. Flourishing has been succinctly defined as “a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives”.¹ Research into adolescent flourishing has been growing in recent years and has begun to identify and illuminate the contexts, conditions and practices that are constitutive for student flourishing in contemporary society.

The *Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools* research project explored the perceived levels of flourishing of adolescents (12 to 18-year-olds) and the specific practices that promote student flourishing across Christian secondary schools in Australia. This report builds upon the growing corpus of literature relating to human flourishing more broadly and specifically focuses attention on adolescents as they navigate their way through secondary schooling in a technology dependent contemporary age.

This study investigated and identified the conditions, contextual factors, and specific practices that can promote positive gains in student flourishing within Christian schools across Australia. Adopting a longitudinal survey design, 22,092 students in Year 7 to Year 12 across 57 Christian schools took part in one of the largest studies of adolescent flourishing in Christian schools ever undertaken.

Based upon longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses of the data, the following six distinct themes emerged regarding student flourishing in Australian Christian schools:

1. Family: Student flourishing and family relationships
2. Formation: Student flourishing across the years of secondary school
3. Relationships: Student flourishing and belonging
4. Learning: Student flourishing and engagement
5. Spirituality: Student flourishing and faith formation
6. Service: Student flourishing and civic and social engagement

The findings outlined in this report provide a plethora of evidence-based practices, priorities and principles for student flourishing and highlight the crucial role that Christian schools, as people forming eco-systems, can play in cultivating the fertile conditions for students to flourish holistically: intellectually, socially, physically and spiritually.



Introduction: The Concept of Flourishing

Central to all quality holistic education is a commitment to see students thrive and flourish in every dimension of their lives. Good education encourages growth and development in deep and transformative ways that shape the life and learning of each student. Whilst recognising the responsibility for the flourishing of students is part of a much wider network of personal, family, church, communal and socio-cultural influences, schools have a significant part to play, as person forming eco-systems, in promoting the conditions and practices that enable young people to flourish.

For Christian school communities, a biblical vision of flourishing should shape and animate an understanding of what it means to be human and should provide the interdependent relational and socio-emotional networks, contexts, and practices for flourishing to occur in all the fullness that God has intended for students. Such a vision should encompass an understanding of personhood that seeks a holistic flourishing of heart, mind, soul and strength in every student.²

The imperative that flourishing holistically in all of life's dimensions necessitates student formation and flourishing in Christian schools, is viewed through the concept of Imago Dei, that recognises every person as bearing God's image and likeness. This perspective orientates students into a bigger story of what it means to be human and also shapes the identity and personal development of students throughout their Christian school journey. Such a view also recognises that students are formed for flourishing relationships with God, self, others, and with all of God's creation. To live as image bearers assumes that living flourishing lives transcends merely personal pleasure and happiness and encourages students to look beyond themselves in deeply interdependent and relational ways.

Flourishing as a concept is best understood by drawing upon the etymological roots of the word, which literally mean "blossoming"³ or "flowering". Such origin of meaning infers both the cultivation of individual growth and development and the conditions and contextual landscapes and eco-systems that facilitate that personal growth and development.⁴ This symbiotic interplay of the roles of the school, the student, the family and the wider community in student flourishing is encapsulated by Pakaluk & Swanson, who expand on this "blossoming" metaphor by suggesting:

A garden combines the elements of soil, water, sunlight, and nutrients to provide the right environment for a specific plant to thrive. In this analogy, students are like specific plants that thrive in specific circumstances. Flourishing results not so much from the garden (or the school) acting on the plants but on the interaction of a specific garden environment with specific plants.⁵

Drawing upon these specific themes and concepts, flourishing has been succinctly defined as "a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives".⁶ VanderWeele et al. (2023) unpacks the garden metaphor further by explaining: "A person may "thrive" even in unfavourable environments, but the "blossoming" associated with flourishing strongly suggests an environment which actively supports that blossoming".⁷

Furthermore, flourishing in adverse and unfavourable conditions is powerfully shaped not by seeking freedom from struggle or the avoidance of difficult circumstances, but by personal dispositions and behaviours that build grit, hope, resilience and endurance.⁸ Flourishing often can and does occur in the midst of trial, adversity, and even suffering and is therefore never to be reduced to a glib quest for merely hedonic pleasure.

Within Christian contexts, the imagery of blossoming, thriving and flowering used to define flourishing closely align with biblical narratives that speak of flourishing in individual, communal and geographical contexts. The Bible portrays flourishing people as being planted by rivers (Psalm 1:3), sustained by living water (John 7:38), and alludes to a complete and total flourishing that brings life in all its fullness to



both people (John 10:10; John 12:23-24; Psalm 92:12), communities (Isaiah 40:5) and places (Jeremiah 29:7; Psalm 72:16).

It is important to note that the focus upon human flourishing as a construct has a long history, dating back to early religious and moral conceptions embedded in the great world religions and also, in the western tradition, to Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia and living well with purpose and meaning.⁹ Historically, flourishing has been perceived from either hedonic (personal happiness) or eudaimonic (ultimate purposes of both individuals and greater good of others) perspectives. More recently, researchers have reconceptualised flourishing as being far more intertwined and have sought to integrate both the subjective and objective conceptions of measuring flourishing in research design and methodology.¹⁰

Researchers typically explore flourishing through the domains of general wellbeing, happiness, purpose, meaning, relational connection, character, and overall mental and physical health. Such emphases when applied to children and adolescents, incorporate psychological, physical, cognitive, material, social and spiritual dimensions.¹¹ The work of centres like the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University have sought to analyse and synthesise the broad question of how knowledge from the social sciences can be integrated with that of the humanities on questions pertaining to human flourishing.

These meta-analyses of social science research, coupled with philosophical and theological traditions, have also enabled the exploration and articulation of topics that promote human flourishing, including the key role that the institutions of family, work, education, and religious communities play in the promotion of human flourishing.¹²

Schools and Student Flourishing

Christian schools play a crucial role in cultivating student flourishing. No school is exempt from curating these processes relating to flourishing in young people, and no school can be neutral to the ultimate questions regarding the purposes of education and what it means to be human that lie at the anthropological heart of all educational communities. Normative questions regarding ideals, values, habits, virtues, experiences, and practices shape every school community and leave an indelible impression upon students in their personal formation and overall flourishing.

In recent times, the dominant narrative within education has been framed around priorities of neo-liberal social efficiency and economic utility. Such narratives powerfully shape the current educational landscape and are deeply embodied in many of our secondary schools through career advice and performative cultures. Whilst some of these elements can be constitutive of flourishing, they are but a subset of a much larger and deeper story of formation and development that is required for our students to flourish holistically.

In challenging this dominant narrative of economic utility that pervades contemporary schooling in western cultures, some have postulated that holistic flourishing is a better and more people orientated telos for education than the social efficiency models that have dominated education discourse and policy for the past sixty years.¹³

Research into student flourishing as a construct has been steadily growing in recent years and is enjoying somewhat of a renaissance currently within the field of education.¹⁴ Increasingly, the focus for research investigating the enhancement of student flourishing has explored the roles, functions and practices of formal institutions of schooling and its role in facilitating and/or inhibiting flourishing in adolescents.¹⁵

There is currently a growing corpus of research that is seeking to focus specifically on how certain evidence-based practices contribute to student flourishing.¹⁶ The outcomes of these studies have great potential to assist educational leaders and policy makers regarding the adoption of evidence informed initiatives across schooling sectors and systems in a diverse range of educational contexts and cultural settings.

This specific study, Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools, and the findings outlined in this report seeks to build upon this growing corpus of research relating to student flourishing. This study specifically focuses attention on Australian adolescents and the evidence-based practices that contribute to their flourishing and formation during their secondary years of schooling within Australian Christian school contexts.

Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools Project

As a capstone research project that ties together a suite of other national research projects and initiatives, Christian Schools Australia (CSA), in collaboration with researchers from Research Schools International (RSI) and the Human Flourishing Program (HFH) at Harvard undertook a landmark research project: *Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools*. The project explored the perceived levels of flourishing of 22,092 adolescents (12 to 18-year-olds) and the specific practices that were evidenced to promote and enhance student flourishing across 57 Christian secondary schools in Australia. In this next section, the distinctive contexts and communities of Christian schools where this Australia wide research study was undertaken will be clearly defined and articulated.



Context for the Research Study: Australian Christian Schools

This national research project was undertaken within Australian Christian schools, a rapidly growing subset of the very large non-government (private) schools' sector in Australia. The following section provides a summary of this specific group of schools within the contemporary Australian education landscape.

The choice of options available within contemporary Australian schooling is significant in both its range and diversity. For the purposes of statistical benchmarking, Australian schools are typically grouped into dominant sectors: government or public schools; and non-government (private) schools - which includes both the Catholic and Independent school sectors. When collectively aggregated across both primary and secondary schooling contexts, approximately 64% of all Australian school enrolments are in Government schools, whilst non-government schools account for about 36% of all student enrolments (primary and secondary enrolments combined). Significantly, 43% of all students graduating from senior secondary school in Australia attend a non-government school (19.2% Catholic; 23.9% Independent),¹⁷ with over 80% of these Independent schools also having some form of religious ethos or affiliation. Researchers highlight that Australia has one of the highest levels of religious schooling in the world when compared to all other OECD countries.¹⁸ This extremely high level of religious schooling in Australia is juxtaposed within a highly secularised Australian socio-cultural milieu, which has increased dramatically over the past fifty years, with 38.9% responders identifying as "no religion" on the 2021 Census.¹⁹

Figure 2.1 provides a breakdown of total student enrolment in Australia in 2024 according to government/non-government sectors across all Australian states and territories:

Figure 2.1

Enrolments by school sector and level	(%) 2024		
Government	Catholic	Independent	
Secondary School	57.4	19.4	23.2
Primary	68.2	18.0	13.8
TOTAL ENROLMENTS	63.4	18.6	18.0

Source: Independent Schools Australia.²⁰

Longitudinal trend data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021-2025; see Figure 2.2) indicates that, while overall student enrolments in government schools have declined slightly (by 0.4%) over the past five years, enrolments have grown by 5.7% in the Catholic sector and by 15.3% in the rapidly expanding independent sector.²¹

Figure 2.2

Student enrolments by school affiliation	2021 to 2025					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	'21-'25 % change
Government	2,622,755	2,605,826	2,614,094	2,619,513	2,613,404	-0.4
Catholic	787,181	795,368	806,323	820,222	831,692	5.7
Independent	620,781	641,318	666,581	692,271	715,822	15.3
TOTAL ENROLMENTS	4,030,717	4,042,512	4,086,998	4,132,006	4,160,918	3.2

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.²²

The Australian Independent Schools Sector

Whilst the independent schools' sector is broad and often difficult to categorise, 81.6% of the sector aligns with some form of religious affiliation or tradition. The largest of these religious groupings are Anglican church-affiliated schools (24.0%), 7.1% are Islamic schools, whilst 6.6% are affiliated in some way with the Uniting Church in Australia and 6.2% are aligned with Lutheran Schools Australia.²³

The independent sector also includes a large percentage of either non-religious or nondenominational schools (15.5%) as well as a growing number of special assistance schools (SAS) and alternative school models. However, the fastest growing grouping within the independent schools' sector in Australia is an ever-expanding network of schools that are commonly termed "Christian" schools.

It is important to note that whilst also broadly categorised as 'Christian', Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and a majority of Presbyterian and Uniting Church schools are generally denominationally run or affiliated with systemic associations established by each of these respective denominations. Due to this denominational administration, these schools, whilst Christian in ethos and values, are often not included in this recently defined grouping of 'Christian' schools within Australia.

Christian Schools

Whilst the presence of faith-based religious schools has historically shaped Australian education since European settlement,²⁴ the post war migration of the 1960s and the subsequent landmark changes to enable private school funding during this time contributed to the rapid rise and growth of a specific type of faith-based school within the Australian independent schools' sector during the 1970s and 80s.²⁵

This new network of schools, whilst somewhat diverse in their denominational expression and tradition, have been referred to in the academic literature as Thematic schools²⁶ but are more commonly now referred to as 'Christian' schools. These schools have historically been locally governed and represent a range of Protestant denominational sub-categories within the independent schools' sector.

These types of schools commenced when groups of Christian parents came together to start schools for the education of their children that aligned with their values and beliefs. One sub-group of these networks of schools, Christian Community Schools Limited (CCSL), commenced in 1976. CCSL was committed to bringing together denominationally diverse Christian schooling groups from across the nation around a common purpose and association, resulting in the incorporation of Christian Schools Australia (CSA) as an entity in 2002.

CSA is a national association providing support for the delivery of Christ-centred educational excellence within Christian Schools. CSA supports and serves member schools directly and through extensive professional development services, bespoke resources, direct assistance, information and advice regarding teaching and learning, governance, leadership and public policy and advocacy to all members.

CSA provides a wide range of support to member schools and the broader community by promoting the advancement of Christian education in Australia and internationally. CSA is a thriving national association of more than 211 school campuses, serving over 15,500 staff and more than 96,500 students.

Geographically, CSA member schools are spread throughout every state of Australia, mainly in outer metropolitan areas, but also in regional, remote, and very remote locations. The schools are community based, serving the local communities where they are located, which are typically low-middle socioeconomic groups but also include some indigenous communities in more remote areas. While some Christian schools focus specifically on serving church families, most of these schools now seek a much broader student enrolment from the communities in which they are located and are often representative of the overall Australian student population.

It is within this specific representation of faith based Australian Christian schools affiliated as members with the peak association of CSA that this research project was undertaken.

Research Design and Methodology

To investigate student flourishing in Australian Christian schools and the specific practices that promote student flourishing, the researchers from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard and Research Schools International (RSI), in collaboration with the CSA research team, designed a longitudinal observational study. The research sought to address the following research questions:

Student flourishing:

- » To what degree are students flourishing across CSA schools?
- » Are there associations between individual differences (e.g. age) and family factors, family structure (e.g. married, single parent), socioeconomic status and flourishing and/or key aspects of flourishing in students?

Practices (including Christian practices) and student flourishing:

- » Which Christian practices carried out at school (e.g. chapel service attendance, reading the Bible, class discussions on Christianity, praying) are associated with flourishing and/or key aspects of flourishing in students?
- » Which evidence-informed practices (i.e. initiatives that foster close social relationships, character skill interventions, service-learning, physical activity, connecting with nature) are associated with flourishing and/or key aspects of flourishing in students?

Research Design

A modified outcome-wide longitudinal design was adopted by researchers at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard and RSI to assess student flourishing over time through self-reported survey responses. The first wave of data collection provided a baseline measure of flourishing among participating secondary students in Australian Christian Schools. The degree of flourishing was quantified using the Adolescent Flourishing Scale developed by the Human Flourishing Program team. The results were then stratified by age, year level, and gender to identify subgroup differences across the 12-18-year-old cohort. The analyses also explored relationships between individual differences in flourishing and a range of family, demographic and socio-cultural factors.

The impact of school-based practices on flourishing was compared to baseline levels during the second wave of data collection using the same survey one semester later. This impact was quantified and evaluated against the frequency that the practices were implemented within schools to identify how much change in flourishing can be attributed to the specific practices.

Analyses were applied to students' responses to a range of evidence-informed practices which are currently employed within schools more broadly and also to responses to a range of specifically Christian practices commonly adopted in schools. These analyses formed "natural experiments" across schools based on the frequency in which various practices were implemented. The longitudinal comparison of changes in the flourishing of students, over time, across schools with different practices then provided evidence as to the effectiveness of the practices in promoting flourishing.

The key feature of this study design was the control of evaluating the change in flourishing from baseline. Comparing students to themselves over time provided a natural benchmark from which the promotion of flourishing could be assessed.

Survey Design

Responses were collected via an online survey using the Qualtrics platform. The survey was developed by researchers from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard and students aged 12-18 attending Australian Christian Schools were invited to take the survey.

A literature review of academic publications relating to school-based evidence informed general practices that enhanced wellbeing and flourishing in adolescents was undertaken as well as a review

of a range of specific Christian practices commonly implemented within Australian secondary Christian schools. These reviews informed the design of the survey questions and contextualised the practices selected in the literature corpus.

The survey consisted of a range of validated scales measuring student flourishing and several related constructs, as well as students' responses to a range of additional questions relating to specific practices for flourishing and their perceived efficacy.

The survey included twelve statements from the Human Flourishing Program's (HFH) Adolescent Flourishing Measure which students were asked to self-rate on a scale of zero to ten. The HFH's adolescent measure incorporated the following key domains of flourishing:

- » Happiness/life satisfaction
- » Mental and physical health
- » Meaning and purpose
- » Character and virtue
- » Social relationships
- » Safety and security

The survey also collected demographic data about student participants and their families. Additionally, the survey collected data of student perceptions on specific Christian practices in their schools as well as a range of evidence-informed flourishing practices commonly adopted in secondary schools. An open-ended response question was also included in the survey. The same survey was used to collect the first and second waves of data.

School Approval and Parent Consent Processes

CSA submitted this study for review by an external ethics review committee in Australia, with approval granted in October 2023. An invitation to participate in the research was sent to the principals of CSA's 206 member schools across Australia in November 2023. Participating schools were provided detailed information sheets for school principals, coordinators, classroom teachers and parents regarding the study. Included in this pack were expectations and procedures relating to secondary students undertaking 2 x 20-minute surveys, as well as the ethical considerations and consent priorities regarding working with 12 to 18-year-old students. Sample letters that schools could use to ensure parent consent for student participation in the study were also included. Participating schools were invited to attend information sessions hosted by the project team which outlined the process for survey implementation.

The online survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete and was administered at each participating school with a supervising classroom teacher. Students completed the survey independently in one continuous session during school hours.

The participating schools were required to schedule a dedicated time during school hours for all students who had obtained parent consent. For the baseline survey, the schools chose a date/time at the start of the Australian school year in February 2024. For the second survey, schools were instructed to collect data in late July/August, 2024.

Data Collection

At the start of the 2024 school year (Wave 1), and the commencement of Semester 2, 2024 (Wave 2), the project team administered the completion of the survey with all participants using online surveys in Qualtrics.

Survey Responses

57 CSA member schools across Australia participated in the study. The total survey responses for the Wave one student flourishing survey after data cleaning were 22,092 respondents. The total responses for Wave two after data cleaning was 17,295.

Wave One Student Flourishing Survey (February 2024)	n = 22,092
Wave Two Student Flourishing Survey (August 2024)	n = 17,295



Survey Analyses

The analyses conducted for this study were broken up into two major groups: cross-sectional descriptive statistics and longitudinal analyses.

Methods for Analyses

Descriptive Statistics – Estimated Group Means

Descriptive, cross-sectional analyses of the Wave 1 data were undertaken across a wide range of student responses and are presented as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation. Missing data were imputed using 100 imputed datasets and these datasets were pooled to account for uncertainty in the estimates. Individual student flourishing scores were calculated by adding individual student responses (0-10) to the 12 questions on the adolescent flourishing index and dividing by 6.

Longitudinal Analyses

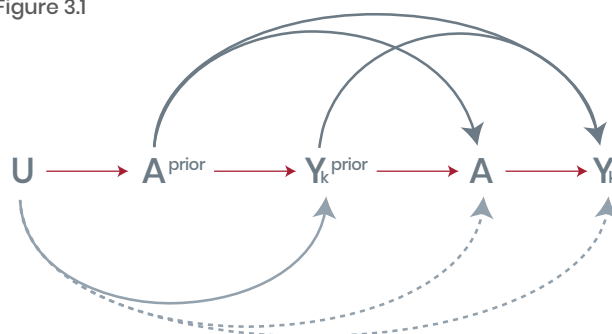
To examine the relationship between practices and student flourishing, the research team used a modified outcome-wide longitudinal design for causal inference. This method (see VanderWeele et al, 2020) controls for prior levels of practice engagement and flourishing, along with prior sociodemographic characteristics.²⁷ The focal longitudinal analyses were geared towards answering the question about whether practices adopted in schools (Christian practices and more generic evidenced-based practices) are associated with increased flourishing and wellbeing of students. To help answer this question, the research team adopted a modified outcome-wide longitudinal design with estimates derived from analyses with multivariate control. Students completed surveys at two timepoints. At baseline (Wave 1), they reported on their engagement in various practices (e.g. frequency of prayer or engaging in play) over the previous year in school and answered questions about their current wellbeing. At Wave 2, they reported on their engagement in those same practices over the last few months since the last data collection and their current wellbeing.

When combined, this created four “timepoints” of data that can be analysed together:

- » A^{prior} frequency of engagement in practices over the previous year in school (Wave 1, timepoint 1)
- » Y_k^{prior} current wellbeing (Wave 1, timepoint 2)
- » A frequency of engagement in practices over the last few months since the wave 1 data collection (Wave 2, timepoint 3)
- » Y_k current wellbeing (Wave 2, timepoint 4)

Measuring prior levels of the exposure (A) and outcome (Y) helps control for unmeasured confounding as well as baseline levels of practice frequency and wellbeing. This approach enabled the calculation of the percentage increase in flourishing scores between Wave 1 and Wave 2, highlighting which activities are most strongly associated with improvements in student flourishing. We used a relatively robust set of controls based on demographic characteristics and school characteristics. The % change is based on conversion of the beta-coefficient from the estimated regression model as this was an easier metric to interpret than a regression coefficient.

Figure 3.1



Replication of causal diagram illustrating how conditioning on prior levels of the exposure (A) and outcome (Y) help to control unmeasured confounding (U)

Emerging Themes Arising from Data Analyses

After analyses were undertaken of both waves of student survey data, the statistically significant contributions to improved student flourishing of a diverse range of evidence-based practices were identified and classified. Given the large sample size, most analyses reached statistical significance at a threshold of $p < 0.001$ suggesting that the observed differences are unlikely to be due to chance.

To assist in sequencing and describing these results, we have identified six distinct themes that have emerged regarding student flourishing in Australian Christian schools:

- Family: Student flourishing & family relationships
- Formation: Student flourishing across the years of secondary school
- Relationships: Student flourishing & belonging
- Learning: Student flourishing & engagement
- Spirituality: Student flourishing & faith formation
- Service: Student flourishing & civic and social engagement

These themes will be described, analysed, and evaluated in the subsequent sections of this report. Specifically, each section will present the findings relating to evidence-based practices and how these practices had an impact upon student flourishing in significant ways.

We will commence Section 5 with findings relating to a foundational element for student flourishing – family. This section will identify the key findings arising from the study that reinforced the importance of parents and extended family relationships.

Building upon these findings relating to the foundations of family for student flourishing, Section 6 will investigate results that identified the formative challenges and opportunities for flourishing that occur during the years of secondary school for adolescents. This section, entitled formation, explores the developmental impact of student flourishing through secondary school that was revealed in our analyses. The pervasive impact of smartphone use and sleeping patterns on student flourishing are also investigated in this section.

Section 7 identifies the importance that strong student-student and teacher-student relationships play in student flourishing and reinforces the critical role that these connections have in overall flourishing. A range of specific practices that incorporate and promote these connections are also articulated in this section.

In Section 8, we explore the evidence-based practices that significantly enhance learning and engagement within Christian schools and highlight how many of these practices led to dramatic increases in overall flourishing of students.

Section 9 outlines the findings that revealed the important role of spirituality in student flourishing and explores the specifically Christian practices that positively impacted upon the overall flourishing scores of students.

Finally in Section 10, we explore the practical and cumulative outworking of each of these evidence-based practices regarding service and civic and social engagement and the positive impact these public facing activities have upon individual student flourishing.

We conclude the report with a summary of key priorities for student flourishing in Australian Christian schools arising from the study and propose an emergent conceptual framework to assist in this important process.

In the themes and analyses that follow in this report, we encourage readers to consider how the patterns and trends identified complement, contrast with, or challenge other competing stories regarding adolescent flourishing and the practices that promote student flourishing and wellbeing in the specific contexts of Australian Christian schools. It is hoped that these findings spark meaningful conversations, that both validate and reinforce why student flourishing is such a critically important priority in contemporary education discourse more broadly, and within Christian schools more specifically. It is also hoped that these findings will provide new baselines regarding the flourishing of secondary school students within Christian schools in Australia as well as identify a range of highly significant, evidence-based practices which can facilitate, enhance, and promote student flourishing within Australian Christian schools.



Family: Student Flourishing and Family Relationships

“Importantly, when parental warmth was considered independently, it was found to be the most important aspect of parenting and subsequent child wellbeing. These studies suggest that the childhood experience of loving warmth between parent and child is a pivotal factor in a child’s future flourishing”²⁸

A foundational theme that arose from our analyses was the essential role that parents and extended family plays in student flourishing. Parents are essential, not peripheral, to the education and flourishing of young people and this partnership necessitates that parent voices and perspectives are valued, heard, and well understood across all school communities. School and families have the potential to be mutually supportive of student flourishing in dynamic ways and there exists a causal reciprocity between healthy schools and healthy families in the growth, development, and flourishing of young people.²⁹ Research by the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard confirms that families, in partnership with schools and the community, enhance the capacity for the development of virtues necessary for life satisfaction, happiness, purpose and meaning, and social cohesion. Such virtues include the nurturing of self-sacrifice, commitment, kindness, empathy, and forbearance. Families are a critical foundation in a flourishing society and are essential to flourishing students, flourishing cultures, and social stability.³⁰

A report on wellbeing in Australian schools contends that, *“though the parent-child relationship may feel very external to the school’s context, schools have a valuable role to play in supporting students via the family setting”*.³¹ Previous CSA research has highlighted the importance of strong connections, involvement, and engagement by parents and caregivers within school communities.³² In an age of increasing disconnection, isolation and fragmentation, Christian schools often provide the social glue that connects students, families and communities together. Schools that are highly intentional about promoting flourishing in students value the importance of building close connections and engagement with their parent community and seek to create a welcoming and inviting sense of place whereby meaningful and highly relational networks are established with families.³³ Researchers have identified how important the student’s family environment is to student flourishing and how strong family relationships impact the school and community to contribute to flourishing during adolescence.³⁴

Our cross-sectional, descriptive analyses within this study identified that student flourishing scores were significantly higher for students with parents who were married (7.23) compared to those that were not married (6.56) (see Figure 5.1). This pattern was consistent for both male and female students.

Figure 5.1

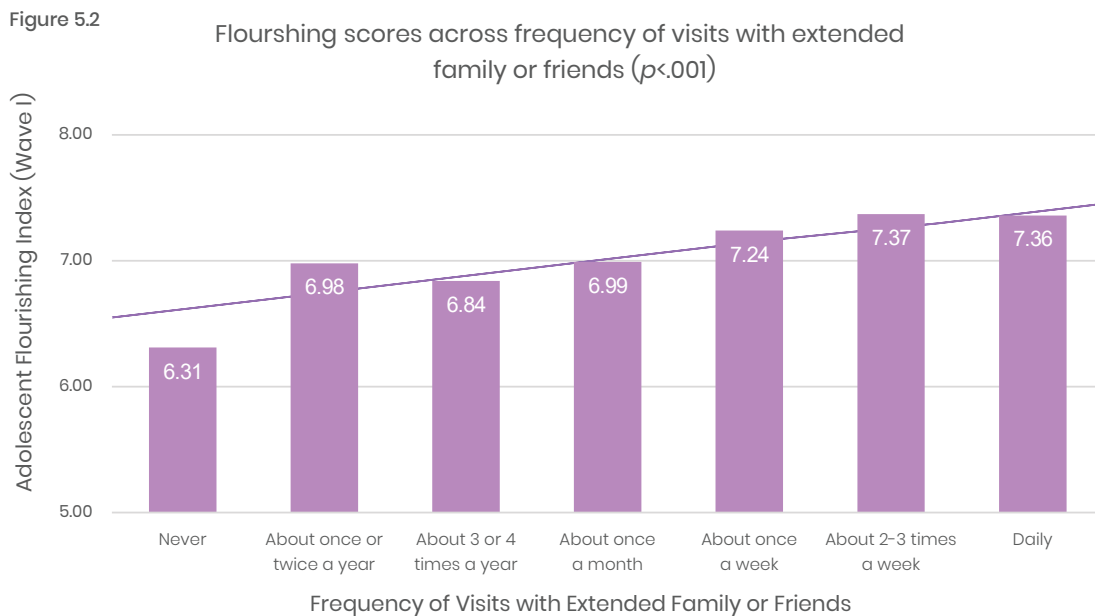
Student flourishing scores are higher for students with parents that are married compared to not married ($p < .001$)



While caution should be applied to these findings, as they are descriptive only and should not be interpreted as causal, research supports the positive impact of stable family structures on key aspects of flourishing for both adults and children.³⁵ These studies associate stable family relationships with higher life satisfaction, happiness, meaning and purpose, and healthy social relationships.³⁶

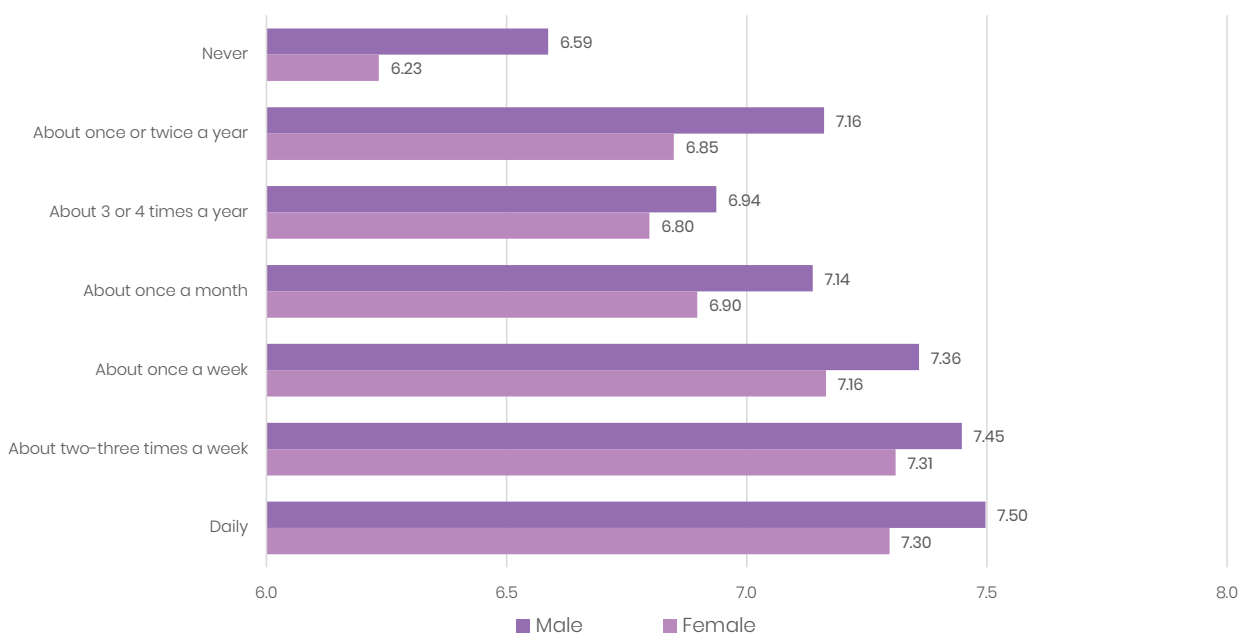
Conversely, divorce has been shown to negatively impact mental and physical health, happiness, life satisfaction, relationships between children and parents, and financial stability. For children, being raised within a marriage correlates with better mental and physical health, higher happiness levels, improved relationships with parents, and a decreased likelihood of engaging in delinquent or criminal behaviours.³⁷ While researchers have clearly identified that adverse family experiences, such as abuse and neglect in both married and unmarried contexts, negatively impact adolescents' wellbeing and their ability to flourish, studies also show that young people can still flourish despite these traumatic experiences. This is often due to the presence of highly supportive structures and networks, such as involvement in church, school and community groups.³⁸ Schools, therefore, play a vital role in promoting safe, supportive and deeply relational networks of care and compassion for all students, irrespective of their family background.

Cross-sectional descriptive analyses revealed that student flourishing was significantly higher with more frequent visits with extended family and friends (Figure 5.2). These results were consistent across both boys and girls within the respondent sample (Figure 5.3). Our findings highlight the importance of relational networks in cultivating and strengthening student flourishing during adolescence and confirm the popular adage "it takes a village to raise a child". The findings also reinforce the important socialisation processes and communal practices for adolescents that develop because of stronger networks of family and friendships that are cultivated outside of the schooling context.



NB. Results on these graphs are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

Figure 5.3 Flourishing scores across frequency of visits with extended family or friends by gender



We also identified that student flourishing scores were significantly higher for students who feel more loved by their parents/guardians, with students who reported feeling loved “very much” (7.65) having mean flourishing scores significantly higher than students who reported feeling loved “very little” (4.32). These results show a positive association between the students perception of parental love and student flourishing scores (see Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5). It is important to note that these findings are descriptive and based on students’ self-reported perceptions, which are not objectively validated.

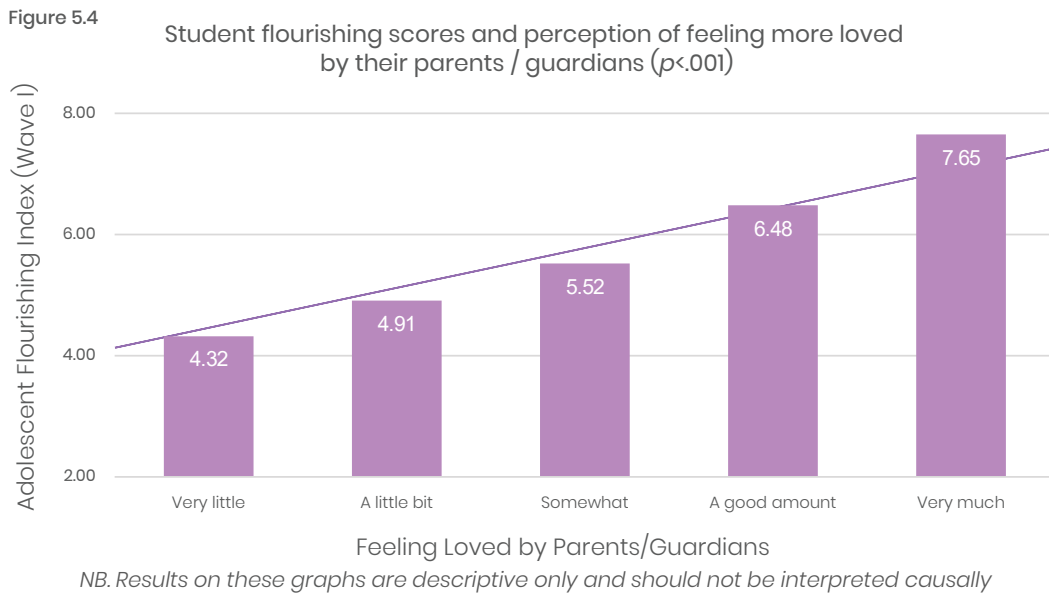
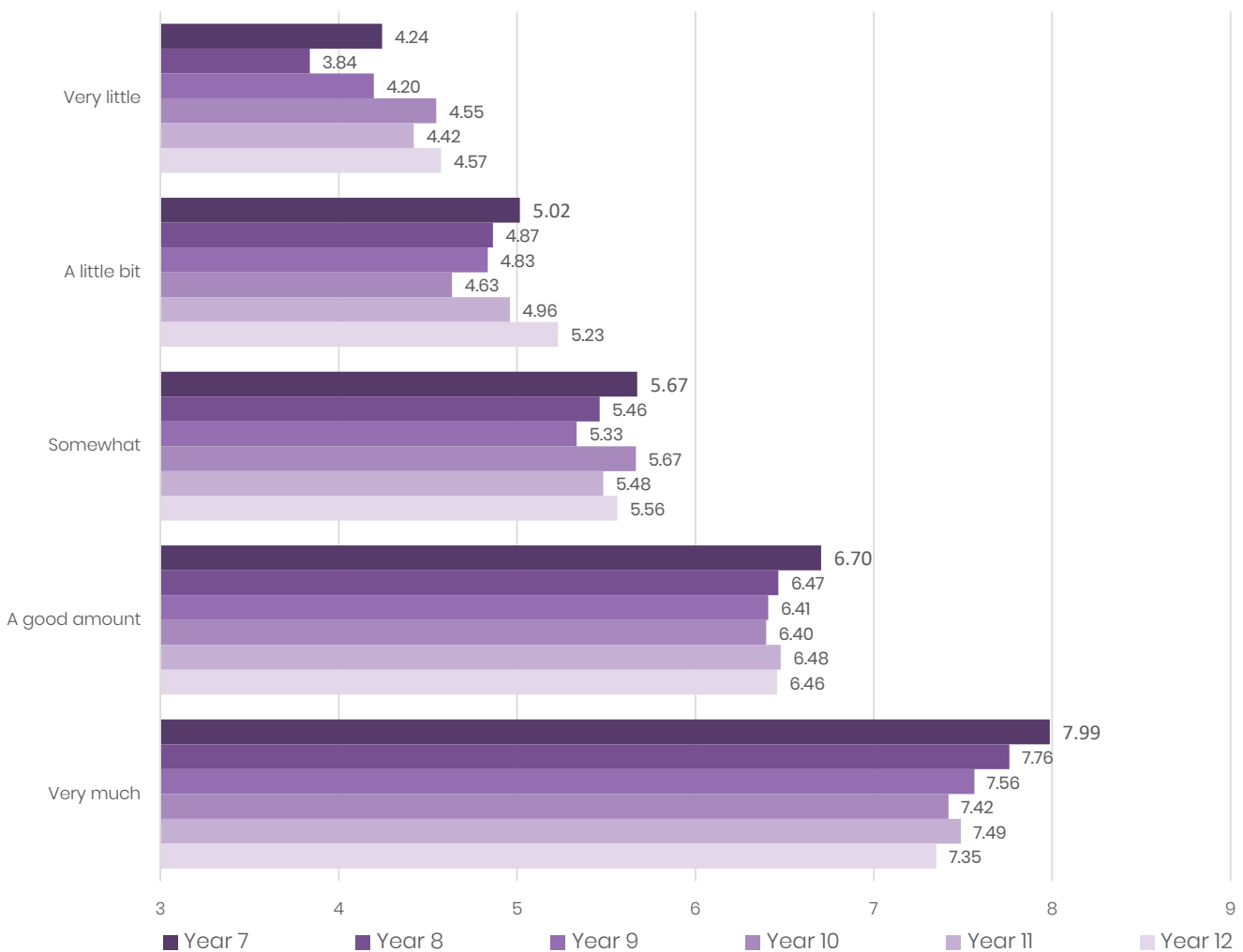


Figure 5.5
Flourishing scores and perceptions of feeling loved by parents/guardians by year level



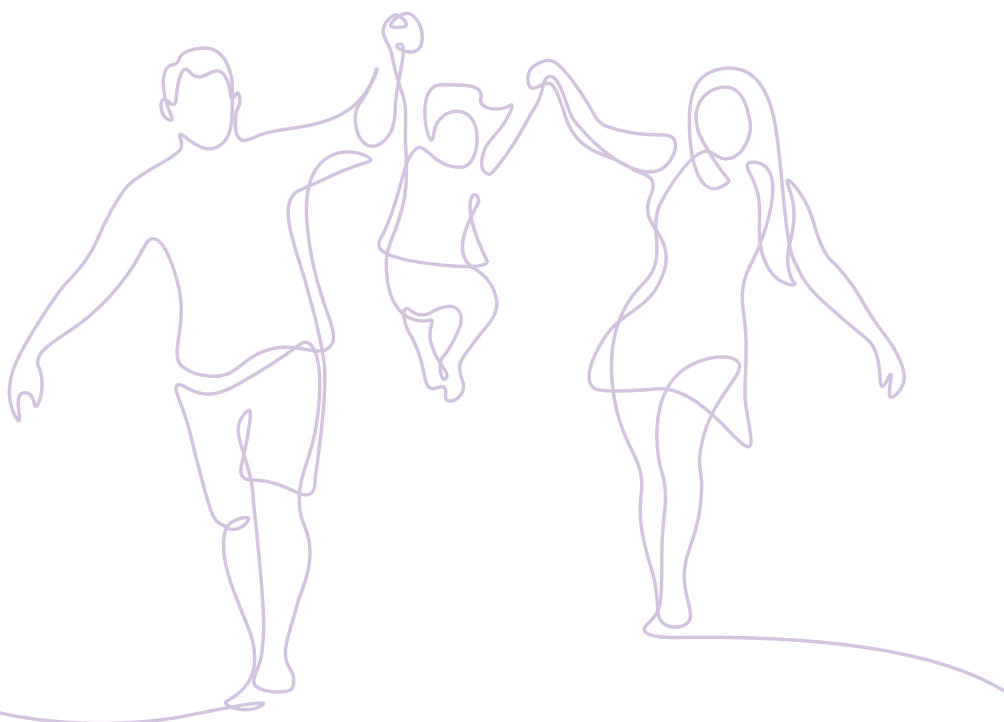
Whilst not inferring causality, the cross-sectional findings suggest young people experience the significant impact on their flourishing when they are loved and valued by their parent, guardian, or caregiver.

Summary

Our findings reinforce the essential role that parents and extended families contribute to the overall flourishing of adolescents. The statistical significance of these findings regarding parental love, family stability, support and family networks and relationships underscores the difference that these elements have upon student flourishing during their secondary years. These findings also reaffirm the importance of intentionally cultivating partnerships between parents/caregivers, the home, the school, and the wider community in the provision of a quality holistic Christian education.

Implications for Schools

- » Explore ways to celebrate and acknowledge the essential role and impact that parents, as the primary caregivers, and the extended family unit have upon student flourishing.
- » Develop multiple opportunities for parents to engage and participate in school experiences and activities. Studies have found that family attendance at parent education events and partnering with school-based wellbeing and flourishing programs was associated with significant longitudinal reductions in negative mental health and wellbeing.³⁹
- » Promote strong partnerships with families and the local community on issues relating to the promotion of student flourishing – these may include forums and events on topics like antibullying, social media, sleep, physical activity, parenting seminars, and communicating with teenagers.⁴⁰
- » Actively engage families in meaningful service and volunteerism across the school community. Research indicates that parent levels of engagement decline with each passing year of secondary school.⁴¹ Promoting higher levels of parent engagement produces deeper levels of commitment and purposeful interaction with a school community.
- » Encourage stronger relationships with parents in ways that are more than just transactional but are reciprocally beneficial to the flourishing of students and the school community.





Formation: Student Flourishing Across the Years of Secondary School

“For the young people in our schools, every conversation they have, every friendship they develop, every time they pick up their phone, every YouTube clip they watch, is forming them in some way. Students are constantly exposed to cultural narratives and practices which form their identity and purpose, and ultimately shape their imagination, desires, and visions of the good life.”⁴²

The holistic growth and development of adolescents as they journey through secondary school is an essential yet highly complex and at times challenging process. Adolescence is marked as a period of significant transition and change, and because of these tumultuous changes, it is imperative that the developmental, personal, and psychosocial and socio-cultural needs of young people are well understood during the formative secondary years of schooling. Christian schools best engage students during these years by seeking to intentionally cultivate flourishing across every facet of the student’s life and learning: academically, physically, socially, and spiritually.

This process of adolescent development occurs within the context of a range of competing stories regarding who students are, what they are expected to do, and who they are becoming. Students enrolled in Christian schools are part of a much larger cultural and moral ecosystem that is constantly impacting upon and forming students’ lives. Student flourishing occurs not just with the individual or a specific school setting, but also within the varied contexts of family, friendships, social media, and ever evolving community norms and expectations. As such, any focus on student flourishing during these years must be contextually dependent upon the range of cultural narratives that are shaping our students’ development, actions and behaviour during this transitional period.

Student Formation and the Current Adolescent Mental Health Crisis

Jonathan Haidt has described the state of childhood and adolescence in this current cultural moment as an “anxious generation”.⁴³ Increasingly, the journey of students through puberty into adulthood, typically defined as adolescence, is marked as a time of unprecedented uncertainty, anxiousness, loneliness, fragmentation, alienation and disconnection. This is evidenced in young people’s lives through disconnected relationships, disconnected families, disconnected learning, disconnected purpose, and disconnected social engagement. These challenges combine to make the formation of identity and personality during adolescence in this current generation a highly tumultuous period. This has resulted in a dramatic decrease in levels over the past decade of life satisfaction, happiness, wellbeing, overall self-esteem and a sense of meaning and purpose for adolescents.⁴⁴

These significant decreases have led some to posit that we are currently experiencing a student wellbeing mental health crisis⁴⁵ with The World Health Organization (WHO) identifying that one in seven adolescents worldwide are currently suffering some form of mental health disorder.⁴⁶ Experts are theorising various reasons for such rapid declines, ranging from mobile phone and social media use through to the COVID pandemic, traditional family breakdown, poverty, inequity and increasing social disconnectedness, and isolation.⁴⁷

Within a specifically Australian context, a recent report on the wellbeing of Australian students and staff commissioned by Independent Schools Australia stated:

The research shows that rates of psychological distress are rising. More than 2 in 5 children and young people in Australia reported feeling stressed most or all the time, suggesting many are struggling. One in five report high levels of psychological distress, and 14 per cent meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder.⁴⁸

Such sobering statistics are further exacerbated when considering how poor mental wellbeing negatively impacts on a variety of other aspects of adolescents' lives, and is associated with higher rates of disruptive behaviour, school absence, lower educational attainment, sleep problems, and sedentary lifestyles.⁴⁹

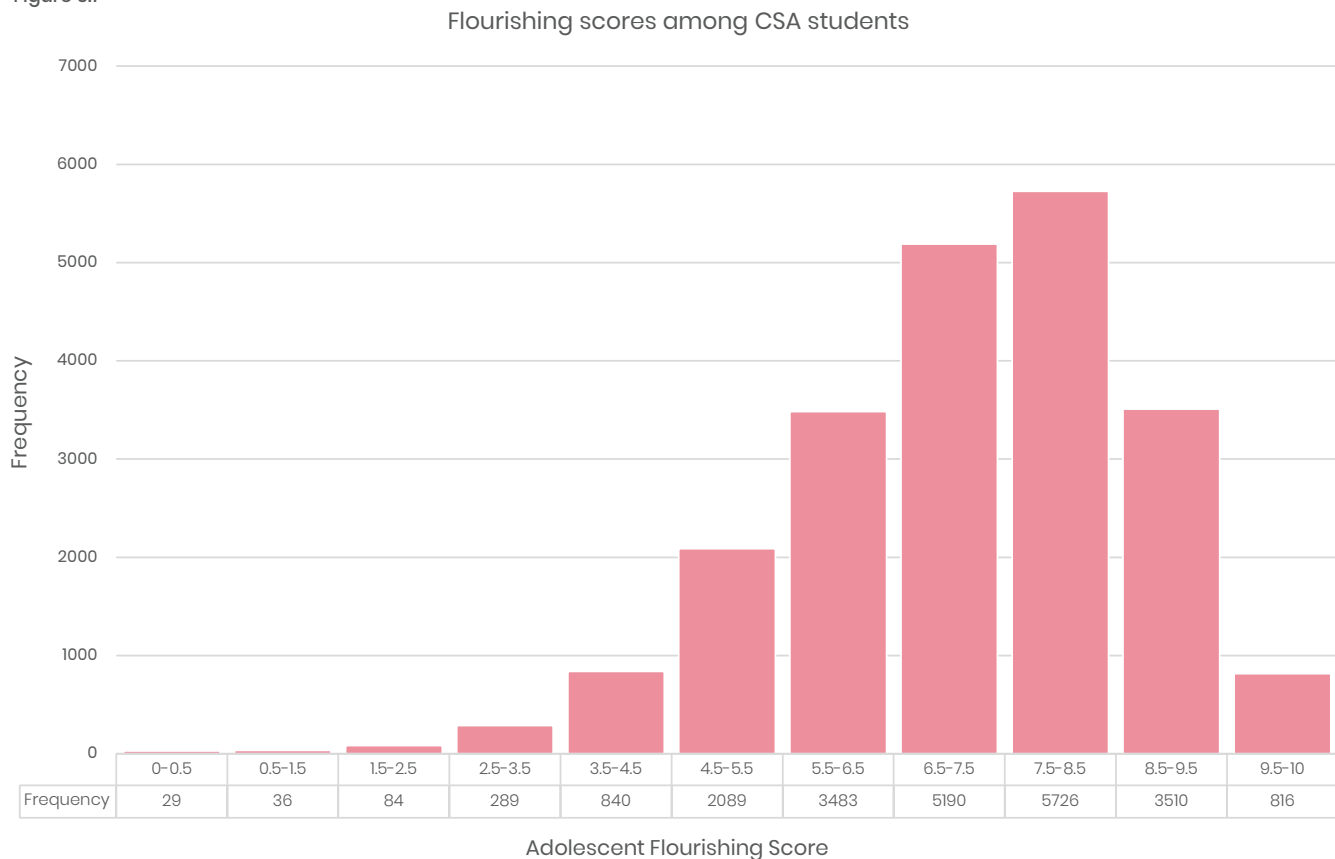
To address these challenges to adolescent flourishing and overall wellbeing, it is imperative that Australian Christian schools respond in evidenced based, proactive and highly engaging ways to counter these trends that are currently inhibiting student flourishing.

Student Flourishing Scores in Australian Christian Schools

The cross-sectional, descriptive findings arising from our analyses within this study have aligned with what other studies have identified regarding declining levels of flourishing during students' secondary school years.⁵⁰ The process of formation through this current period of adolescence in contemporary Australian culture is having a profound and far-reaching impact upon student flourishing throughout their secondary school years.

Whilst there is no external benchmarking for adolescent flourishing currently available, we observed that the flourishing scores for Australian Christian school students are generally representative of the distributions in a range of other much smaller studies undertaken in the United Kingdom using the Human Flourishing Program's Adolescent Flourishing tool.⁵¹ Figure 6.1 provides the distribution of these scores across our entire sample:

Figure 6.1

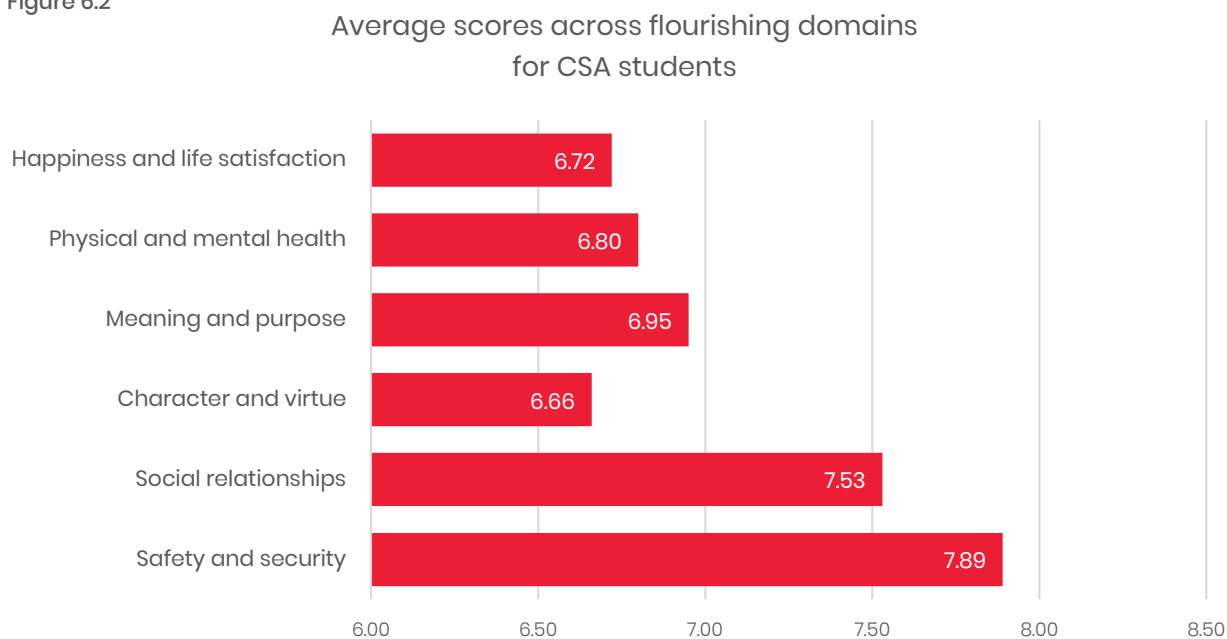


N = 22092
 Average: 7.09
 SD:1.56

Average student flourishing scores across the six flourishing domains showed that a sense of safety and security had the highest mean score (7.89), while overall happiness and life satisfaction (6.72) and character and virtue (6.66) show the lowest (see Figure 6.2). The lower findings relating to life satisfaction are consistent with other research and reinforce Marquez and Long's observation that identified a global decline in life satisfaction of 15-year-olds in PISA⁵² life satisfaction scales in both 2015 and 2018 surveys.⁵³ Similarly, the work of Twenge and other researchers have also noted these steady declines during adolescence since 2011.⁵⁴



Figure 6.2



NB. Results on these graphs are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

Significantly, our analyses also identified that overall student flourishing scores decreased with each succeeding year through secondary school, from a baseline mean score in Year 7 of 7.52, which continued to decrease in each succeeding year level through to Year 12 where the average mean score was 6.83. (see Figure 6.3). This downward trend is evidenced in other flourishing studies with adolescents with Casas' research suggesting that flourishing and subjective wellbeing steadily decreases in students with "age tendency" from the age of twelve.⁵⁵ Findings from studies by UNICEF and the OECD found that overall wellbeing among adolescents has plummeted in countries around the world.⁵⁶ Although the COVID pandemic exacerbated this decrease, it is clear that the overall flourishing of students began steadily declining in advanced countries well over a decade ago.⁵⁷

Whilst this is due to recognition of puberty and other social, neurodevelopmental and physical changes occurring in adolescents during this time, there does appear to be other underlying socio-cultural factors that researchers suggest might be contributing to these decreases.

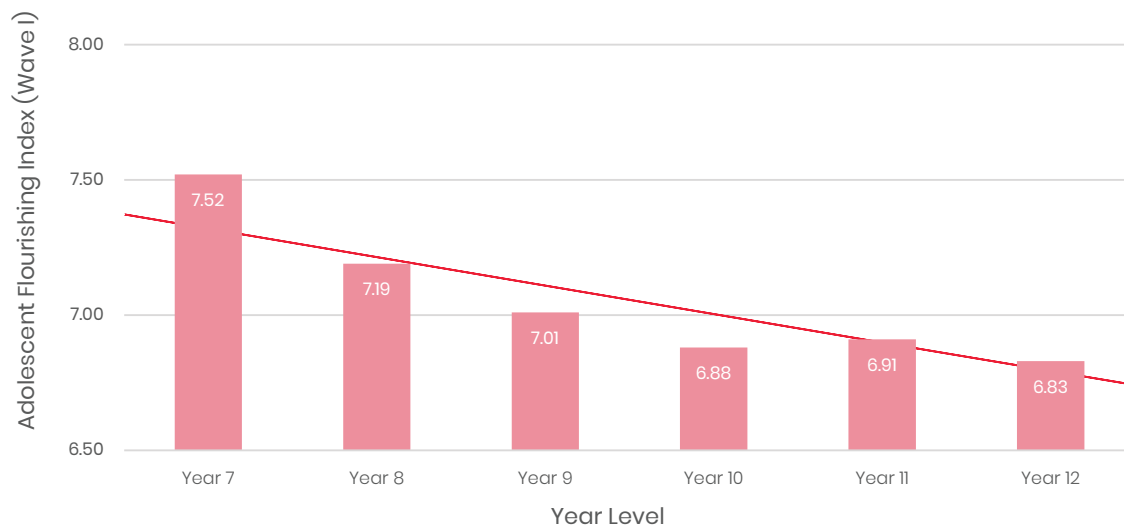
Some researchers have proposed that an over emphasis to achieve certain scores on standardised testing may be attributable to lower overall flourishing scores in adolescence in contemporary schooling.⁵⁸ An Independent Schools Australia report identified that extrinsic pressure on students by parents to achieve high scores, particularly those from high socio-economic backgrounds, has been linked to negative wellbeing during their secondary schooling years.⁵⁹ Whilst challenging and extending students in their learning is absolutely necessary for flourishing academic development, research would suggest unrealistic expectations regarding high stakes testing may be a possible factor in these decreases in flourishing during secondary school.

Other researchers have pointed to the increasing isolation and withdrawal from traditional socialisation processes associated with the rapid rise in smartphone use and social media as possible contributing factors for these decreases,⁶⁰ which we will explore in greater detail later in this section.

When analysing our data (see Figure 6.3), we noted a slight increase in overall flourishing scores in Year 11 (6.91) from overall Year 10 means (6.88), which, though slight, may be attributed to the increased sense of agency, independence, and opportunity that is afforded students at Year 11, but further analysis is required to ascertain the possible reasons for this slight increase at this specific year level across Australian Christian schools.

Figure 6.3

Student flourishing decreases significantly across year levels ($p < .001$)



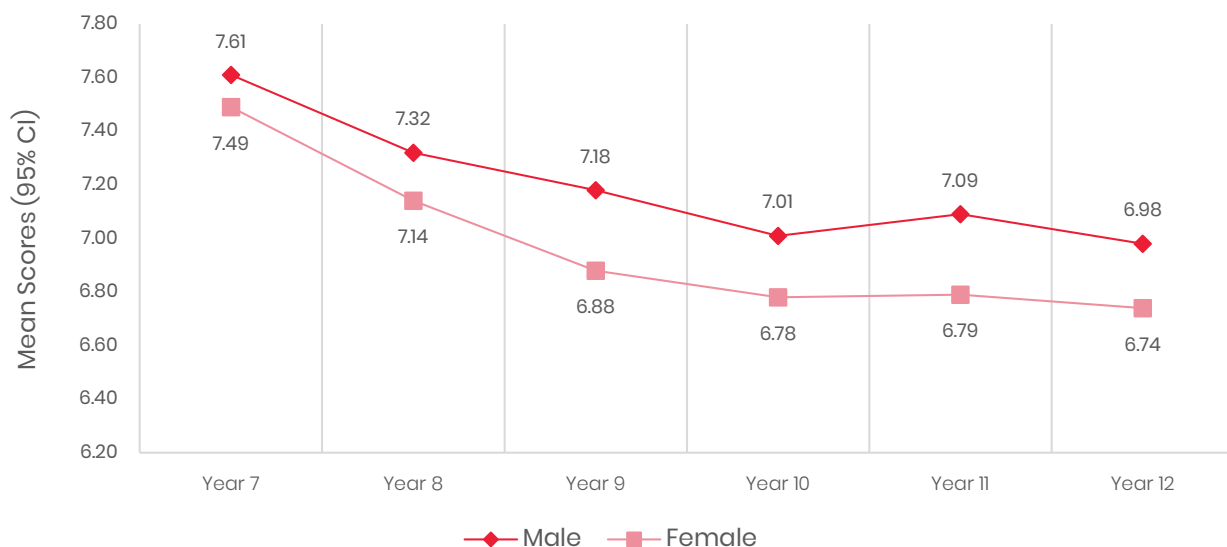
NB. Results on these graphs are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

Student flourishing scores are lower for adolescent girls than adolescent boys

Further descriptive analysis of the student flourishing index scores according to gender found that girls are experiencing a more pronounced drop in their scores from the Year 7 baseline than boys. This trend continues across each subsequent year level throughout secondary school (see Figure 6.4).

Figure 6.4

Student flourishing by year for male and female students
Differences in adolescent flourishing index (Wave 1)



Similar findings have also been identified in Australian Youth Survey Reports where over half the young women surveyed (53.9%) reported that they were stressed either “all” or “most of the time” compared to the response rates of their adolescent male counterparts (26.8%) to the same question.⁶¹ Decreases in flourishing for adolescent girls have also been confirmed in other research with the Good Childhood Report contending in their 2023 findings that “*The latest data seem to paint a worrying picture for girls, with their mean happiness scores for each of the six measures significantly lower*” than any happiness scores since they began the study in 2009.⁶² Marquez and Long also found that adolescent girls’ overall life satisfaction scores across 31 countries were consistently lower than adolescent boys’.⁶³

Burke and Minton propose that lower wellbeing scores for adolescent girls may also (in part) be the result of negative body-image messaging amongst adolescent females which lead to additional pressure to conform to an ‘ideal’ body.⁶⁴ Some studies have identified that adolescent girls are also far more

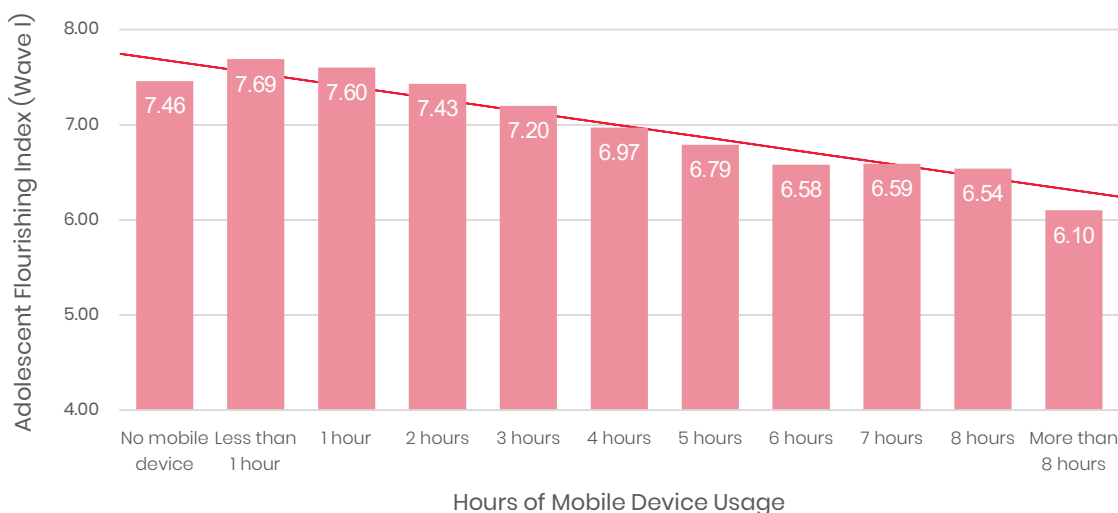
impacted by social media (especially visually orientated apps like Instagram and TikTok) and these in turn may be having a more negative impact upon their overall flourishing particularly during secondary school.⁶⁵ Further analysis of these possible reasons for lower flourishing scores in adolescent girls is therefore required to empirically explain these decreased scores throughout their secondary years.

Smart Phones and Decreased Student Flourishing

As mentioned earlier in this report, a major factor that appears to be impacting the student flourishing of adolescents in secondary school is smartphone use in general and social media use in particular. We sought to explore these possible links in greater detail within this study and to this end included a series of questions relating to smartphone use.

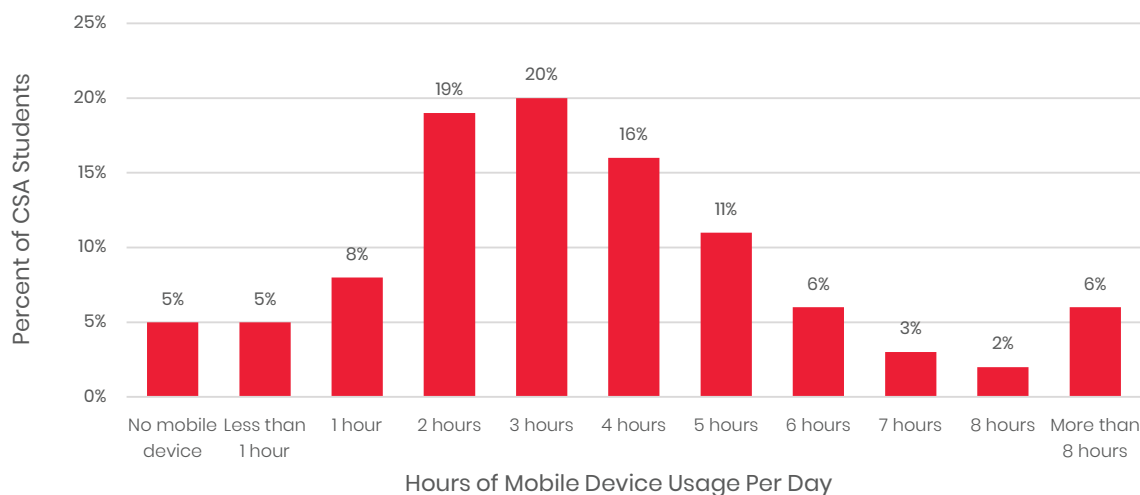
The cross-sectional findings highlighted a correlation between hours of smartphone use and overall flourishing scores, with lower average flourishing scores evidenced in those students who reported using their smartphone for more hours each day (see Figure 6.5). It is interesting to note that students who reported no smartphone use had slightly lower flourishing scores (7.46) compared to those who used a smartphone for one hour (7.6) or less (7.69), implying that a fear of missing out (FOMO) may impact on these flourishing scores when students report not having a smartphone. It was observed that most students across CSA schools (57%) were using their smartphones for three hours or less each day, although over a quarter of the sample were using smartphones for five hours or more each day (28%) which would categorise them as problematic in their use according to other research⁶⁶ (see Figure 6.6).

Figure 6.5 Student flourishing scores across hours of smart phone use, per day ($p < .001$)



NB. Results on these graphs are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

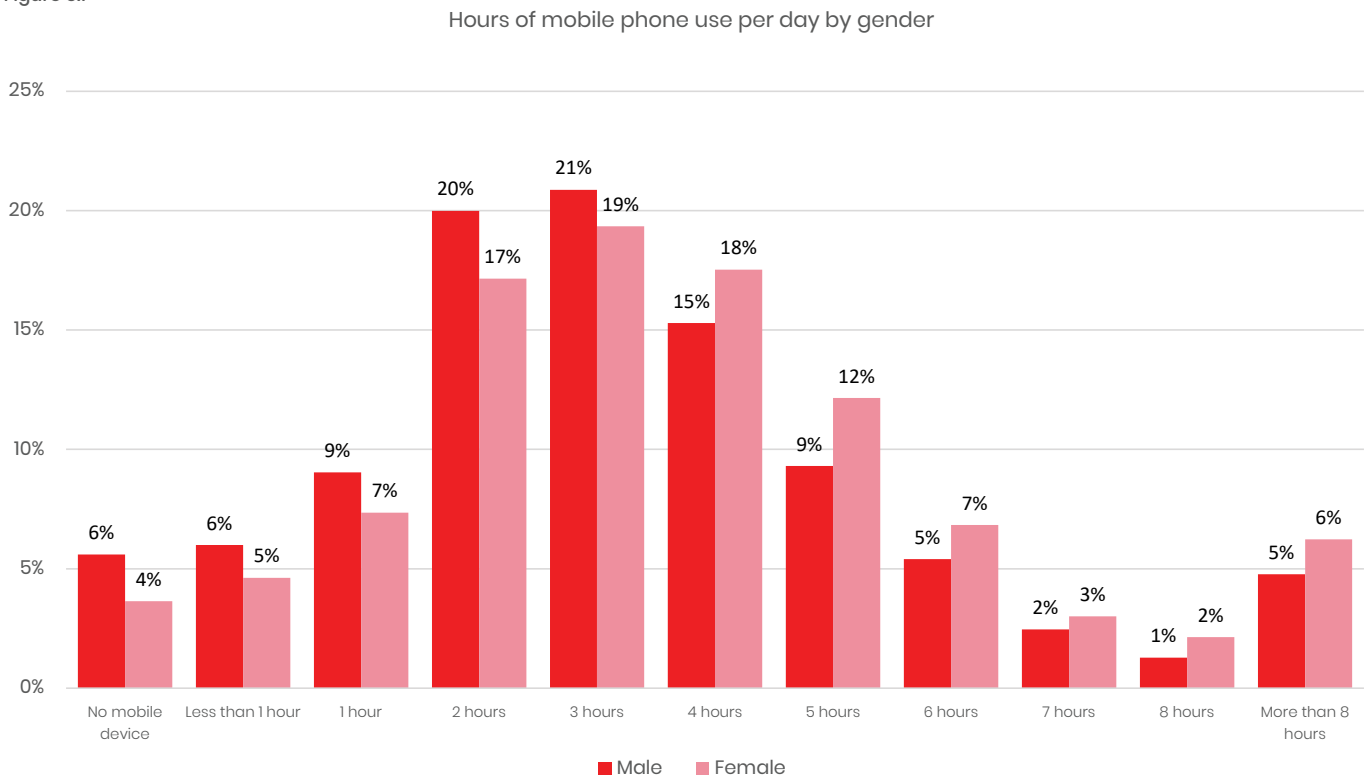
Figure 6.6 Hours of phone use per day among CSA Students



Other research has identified the impact of moderate to excessive smart phone use on negative mental health outcomes and that reducing smartphone hours leads to decreased levels of depression, anxiety and stress, and improvements in overall sleep quality.⁶⁷ Other research supports a view that two hours or less a day of screen time has overall positive impacts on wellbeing and mental health.⁶⁸

Researchers have also pointed to the increasing isolation and withdrawal from traditional socialisation processes associated with the rapid rise in smartphone use with average hours of use rising dramatically over the past 5 years.⁶⁹ Our findings revealed (see Figure 6.7) that girls (48%) were typically spending more time using their smartphones for four hours or more than boys (37%). Conversely, boys were far more likely to spend 2 or less on their smart phones (41%) compared to girls (33%). Similar findings have also been evidenced in other smartphone use studies.⁷⁰

Figure 6.7



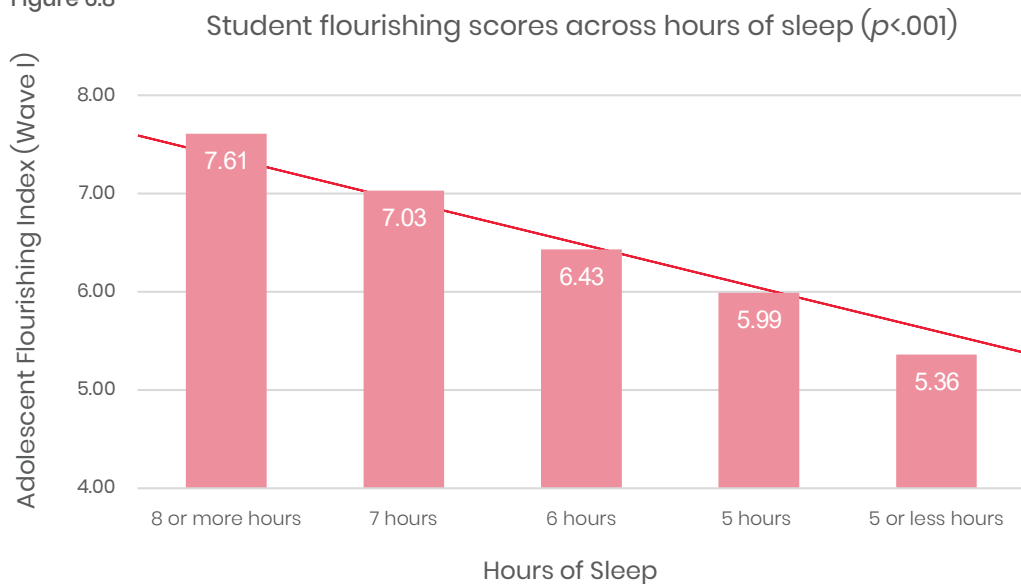
It is also important to note that smartphone analyses such as these are descriptive only and can have limitations, especially due to the tendency for self-reporting by adolescents who can underestimate actual smartphone usage. Furthermore, we also highlight that no screen time on smartphones is ever equal; and we must be cognisant of the way that smartphones are used in different ways by boys – (who also tend to prefer computers over smartphones for gaming use); and girls – (who prefer social media which is best engaged on smartphones). Nevertheless, our findings do identify concerning trends with extended smartphone use and decreasing flourishing scores which are worthy of further investigation for confounding influences and variables.

Student Flourishing and Sleep

Having appropriate hours of sleep each night was also associated with student flourishing. Our descriptive analyses identified that student flourishing is significantly lower for those who report sleeping fewer hours each night (five hours or less 5.36) compared to eight hours or more (7.61) and there was a strong correlation between getting a good night’s sleep (eight hours or more) and higher average flourishing scores across all respondents in our sample (see Figure 6.8). Respondents across all schools participating in the study revealed that nearly 80% were self-reporting seven or more hours of sleep per night ⁷¹ (see Figure 6.9).

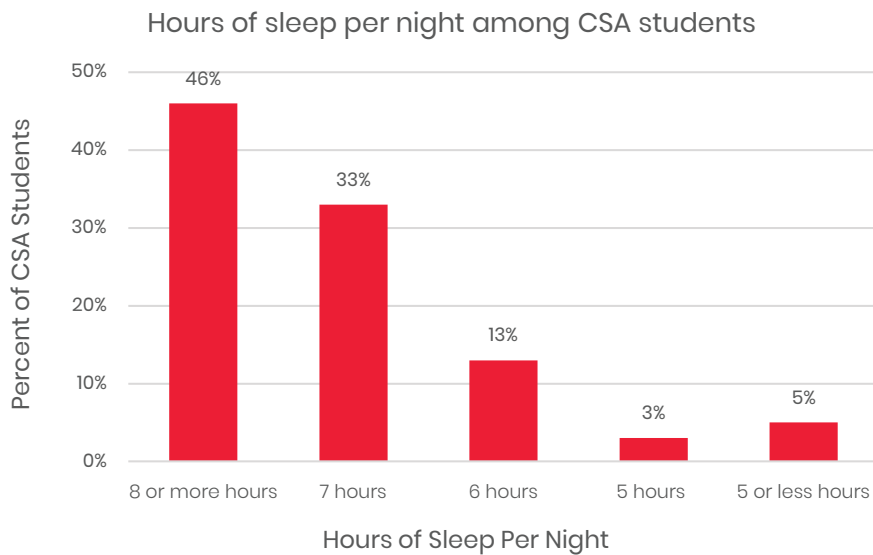


Figure 6.8



NB. Results on these graphs are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

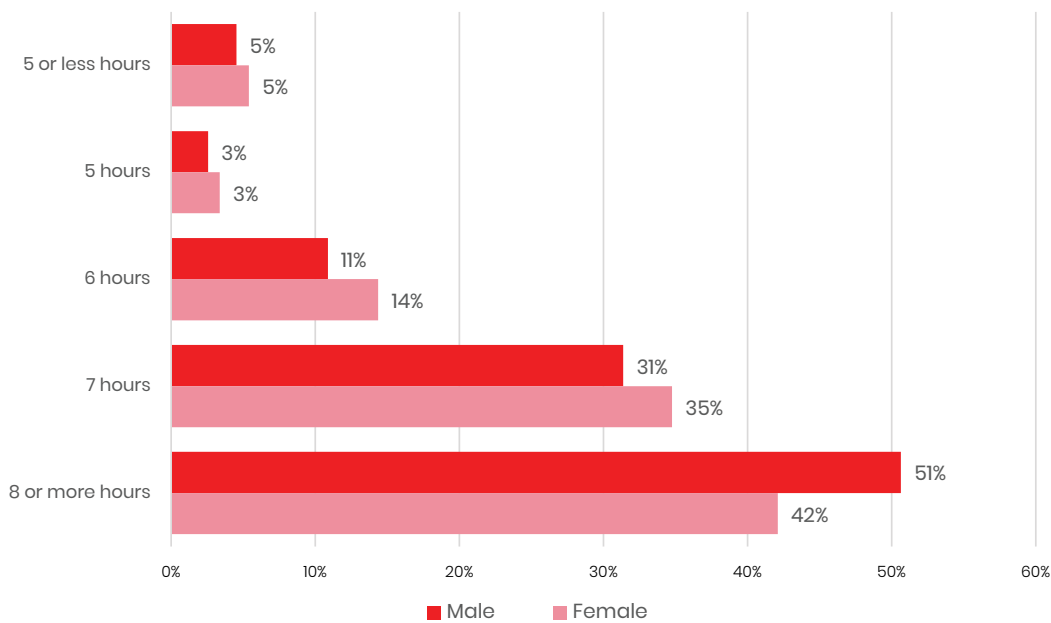
Figure 6.9



We also found that girls were typically getting less sleep (22% had six hours or less) than boys (19%, six hours or less) on average across our participant sample (see Figure 6.10). Girls also reported lower average flourishing scores than boys, especially when experiencing six hours of sleep or less (see Figure 6.11). Other studies have identified that girls generally experience lower hours of sleep during adolescence and as a result are also more likely to develop a range of related mental health disorders than boys.⁷²

Figure 6.10

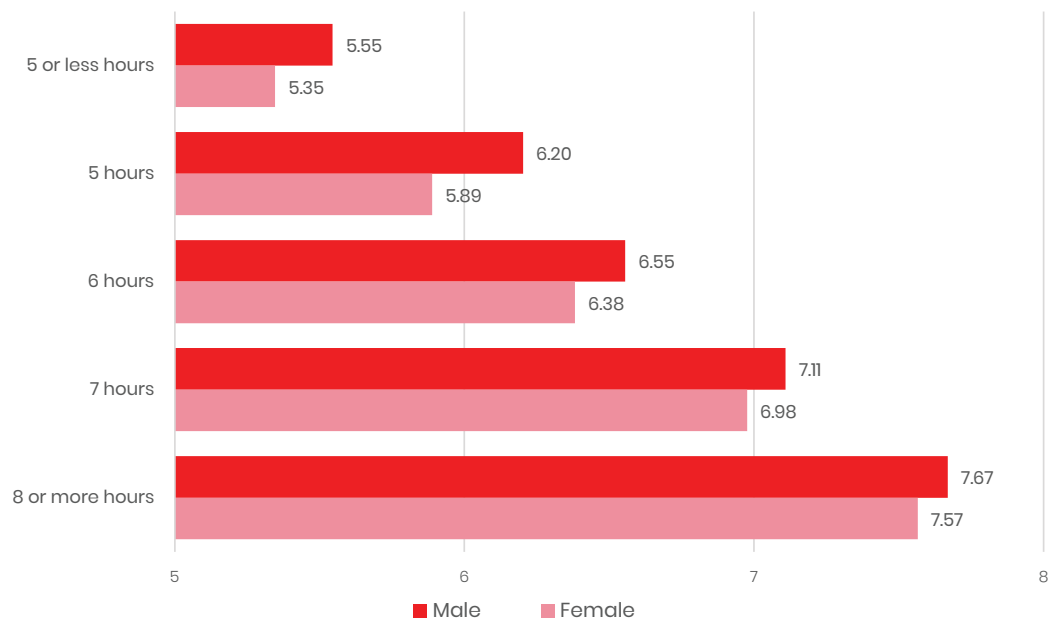
Hours of sleep per night by gender



NB. Results on these graphs are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

Figure 6.11

Flourishing scores and hours of sleep by gender



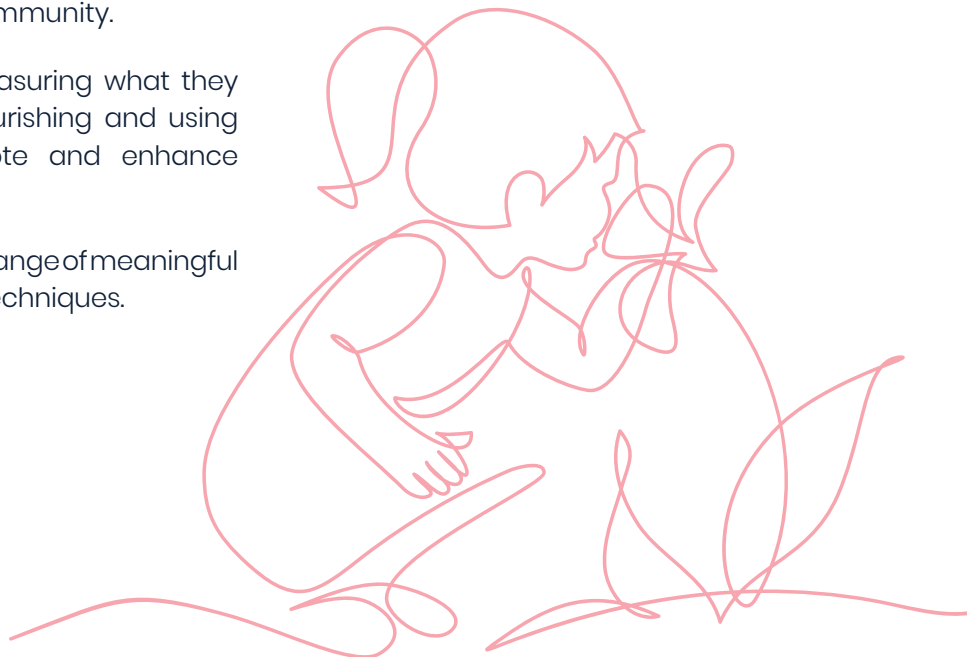
Related research has established links between shorter sleep durations and increased depressive symptoms⁷³ and mental health concerns in young people, particularly for adolescent girls.⁷⁴ Our findings support the need for comprehensive approaches to promoting healthy sleep patterns among adolescents, that consider both sleep quality and duration for young people.

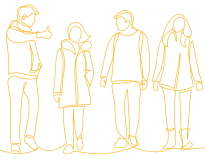
Summary

In the tumultuous journey of formation and ‘becoming’ through an adolescent’s secondary school years, each student must navigate a diverse range of challenges and expectations. A holistic approach to flourishing necessitates that Christian schools need to be vigilant to the significant personal and socio-cultural influences that are promulgated to our young people. Schools need to also recognise the significant impact these messages have upon each student’s growth and development and on the behaviours that they promote. Schools need to be intentional about creating flourishing networks of care and support that focus on the developmental and maturation needs of students at each year level. This requires that the operations and policies of the school align with the science of flourishing and the evidence-based practices that can best facilitate student flourishing during these formative years.

Implications for Schools

- » Develop and articulate well defined understandings of flourishing and ensure that all staff are clear regarding the holistic emphases of student flourishing.
- » Celebrate and actively promote holistic outcomes across a range of subject areas and activities for students. Leaders should ensure they communicate a bigger story to their students regarding the purposes of education than mere social efficiency and economic production. Schools need to ensure that the complex, holistic and highly relational work of teaching and learning is never reduced to narrow unidimensional measures for student outcomes.⁷⁵
- » Cultivate whole-of-school approaches to flourishing for all students. Such approaches should apply evidence-based practices and policies for flourishing of adolescents and resist the siloing of flourishing and wellbeing from the daily rhythms, routines and practices of classroom school life. Such approaches also allow for seamless interactions between classroom expectations and student flourishing needs and considerations.
- » Perceive every staff member who engages with adolescents as a wellbeing leader.
- » Promote comprehensive, clearly communicated and well researched digital literacy, smartphone, social media and technology use policies, procedures and behaviours. These policies and practices should frequently engage open dialogue about the impact of technology on student growth, development and overall flourishing. For students to flourish in a digital age, our schools should not be about disconnection but rather about wise discernment. Such approaches should be communicated to students, staff, parents and the wider community in highly engaging, well-presented and relevant ways.
- » Communicate how the concepts of flourishing align with the developmental needs of students at each year level in well-understood and deliberate ways. These approaches and frameworks should also be clear regarding the specific language and vocabulary of flourishing that the school is adopting, with an awareness of how students may perceive what flourishing means as they progress through each year level and stage of their secondary schooling.
- » Identify and promote positive evidence based practices and behaviours through case studies and stories of “ways of being and becoming”.
- » Promote and regularly communicate across year levels healthy sleep patterns that consider both sleep quality and duration for young people. Communicate these approaches consistently to parents and the wider community.
- » Ensure that schools are measuring what they value regarding student flourishing and using these measures to promote and enhance student flourishing.
- » Promote and utilise a diverse range of meaningful assessment practices and techniques.





Relationships: Student Flourishing and Belonging

“We know that relationships matter. We know from... lessons drawn from tens of thousands of people and hundreds of studies, and a myriad of the brightest sociologists, anthropologists and neuroscientists in the world, that relational wealth, not material wealth, is a stronger indicator of happiness throughout our lives, and that social isolation is a killer.”⁷⁶

Student Flourishing and Social Connection

Research confirms that we don't experience true wellbeing and flourishing in isolation but through deep and meaningful relationships with others. Brian Rosner contends that *“You are not an individual. You are not your own creation. You did not invent yourself. You exist in a web of relationships... Your identity is constituted in relation to other people and in being known by them”*.⁷⁷ Adolescents are deeply relational beings who long for meaningful connection with others. Relationships and strong community connections have been shown to have a significant impact on overall student flourishing, reducing loneliness, improving life satisfaction and wellbeing, as well as providing a sense of purpose and belonging.⁷⁸

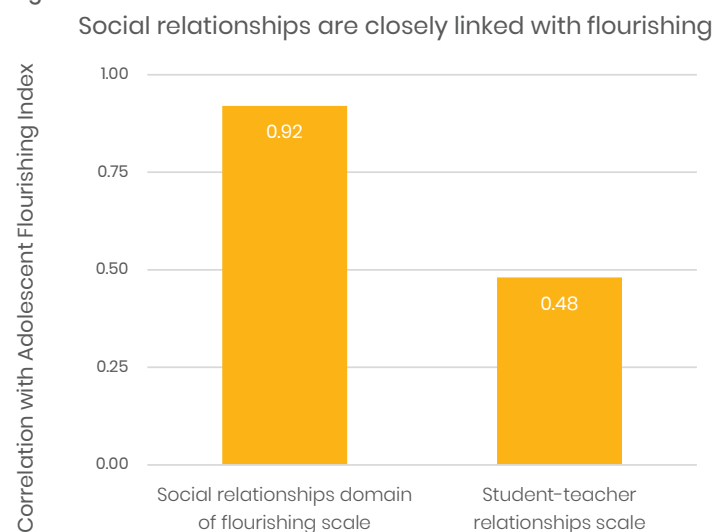
Christian schools draw upon deep theological conceptions of the trinitarian Godhead – three yet one – and our significance as image bearers of this relational and communal God. These foundations give rise to anthropological perspectives of what it means to be human, celebrating and recognising that all students should be seen, known, valued and loved across every aspect of our Christian school community. These relational elements are foundational to our personhood, identity, and ultimate flourishing. Such perspectives motivate us to embody and enact community and relational connections within and across our Christian school communities.

Researchers have identified that individual flourishing can only be sustained in the context of healthy communities and strong relational networks.⁷⁹ Schools are integral to this relational development and can cultivate these networks for adolescents by creating a sense of “well-belonging” for every student.

Student well-belonging has been defined as, *“the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment”*⁸⁰ incorporating the elements of connectedness, membership, commitment, solidarity, and reciprocity. These themes reinforce the truth that, as humans, we all need to belong to somewhere and to someone where we can be seen, heard, loved and known. However, there has been a consistent decline in social and community connection since the 1980's,⁸¹ and for increasing numbers of young people in Australia, loneliness and a sense of social isolation is reaching epidemic proportions.⁸² As a bulwark against these concerning trends, schools have increasingly become networks of relational care and support that also serve as a protective factor against the onset of other mental health and wellbeing issues associated with social isolation and loneliness in students.

The descriptive analyses showed a statistically high correlation between social relationships (0.92) and student flourishing across all respondents. These findings confirm the integral role that social relationships play in student flourishing during adolescence (see Figure 7.1).

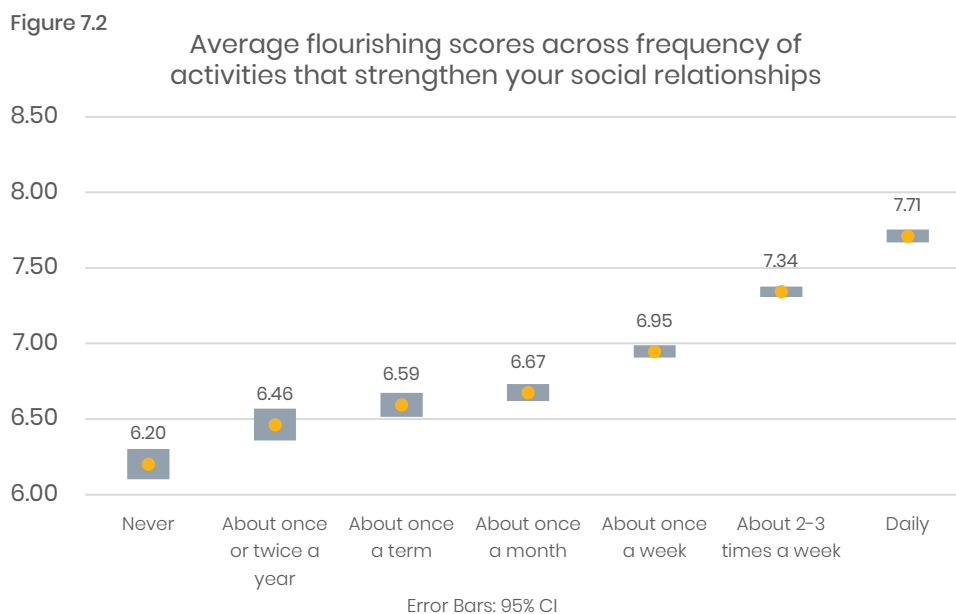
Figure 7.1



Social relationships and student-teacher relationships were positively associated with student flourishing, with strong and moderate correlations of $r = .92$ and $r = 0.48$, respectively.



Descriptive analyses indicated that student flourishing was higher among those who reported more frequent participation in activities that strengthen social relationships. Students who experienced these practices daily reported higher flourishing scores (7.71) compared to those who experienced them rarely (6.46) or never (6.20) (see Figure 7.2). Longitudinal analyses with multivariate controls showed that student flourishing increased by 11% between Wave 1 and Wave 2 for students who engaged in these types of social activities – the third highest rate of increase among all evidence based practices examined.



NB. Results on this graph are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

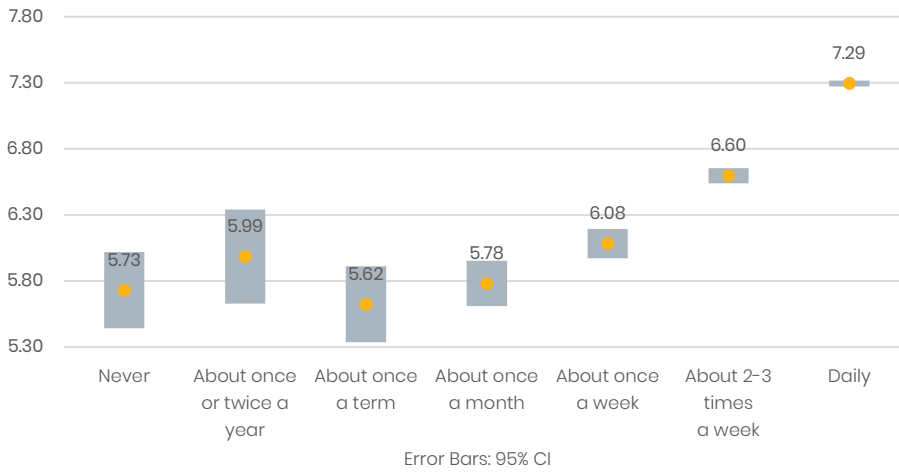
Other studies have identified that activities and programs that positively nurture friendships at school lead to greater student flourishing and that incentives that promote peer relationships and social skills can lead to highly positive effects on students' emotional regulation, self-concept, coping skills, and prosocial behaviour.⁸³ Studies have also found that meaningful school friendships have been linked to a range of positive wellbeing outcomes, including a sense of belonging, happiness and life satisfaction, positive mental and physical health, and positive social-emotional development.⁸⁴ Whole-of-school Intervention programs and initiatives that actively teach social and emotional skills to students have also been found to significantly improve overall wellbeing, reduce bullying and antisocial behaviour, and strengthen interpersonal relationships in secondary students.⁸⁵

An example of a highly effective whole-of-school intervention is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which provides school wide comprehensive policy and practice initiatives to engage students, parents, staff, and the broader community in enhancing relationships and connectedness across the school.⁸⁶ Whole-of-school programs like SEL also can provide valuable insights into possible at-risk student behaviours or those students that are at risk of isolation, loneliness, and other negative wellbeing outcomes.⁸⁷ Whilst further research is needed to determine the impact of whole-of-school approaches to social and emotional learning on student flourishing in Christian schools, it is apparent that initiatives that foster positive relationships at school have tremendous potential to enhance a sense of belonging and connectedness across school communities.⁸⁸

Modified outcome-wide longitudinal multivariate analyses of both waves of the Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools data provide evidence that student flourishing scores increased the most when students laughed with peers at least once a month, with a 22% increase observed from Wave 1 to Wave 2 (see Figure 7.4). Complementing these findings, cross-sectional descriptive data presented in Figure 7.3 show a positive association between the frequency of laughing with other students and student flourishing scores. Mean scores increased progressively from 5.78 among students who laughed with peers monthly, to 6.08 for weekly, and 6.60 for two to three times per week, with the highest scores observed among those who laughed with others daily (7.29).

Figure 7.3

Average flourishing scores across frequency of laughing with other students



NB. Results in Figure 7.3 are cross-sectional descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

Figure 7.4a

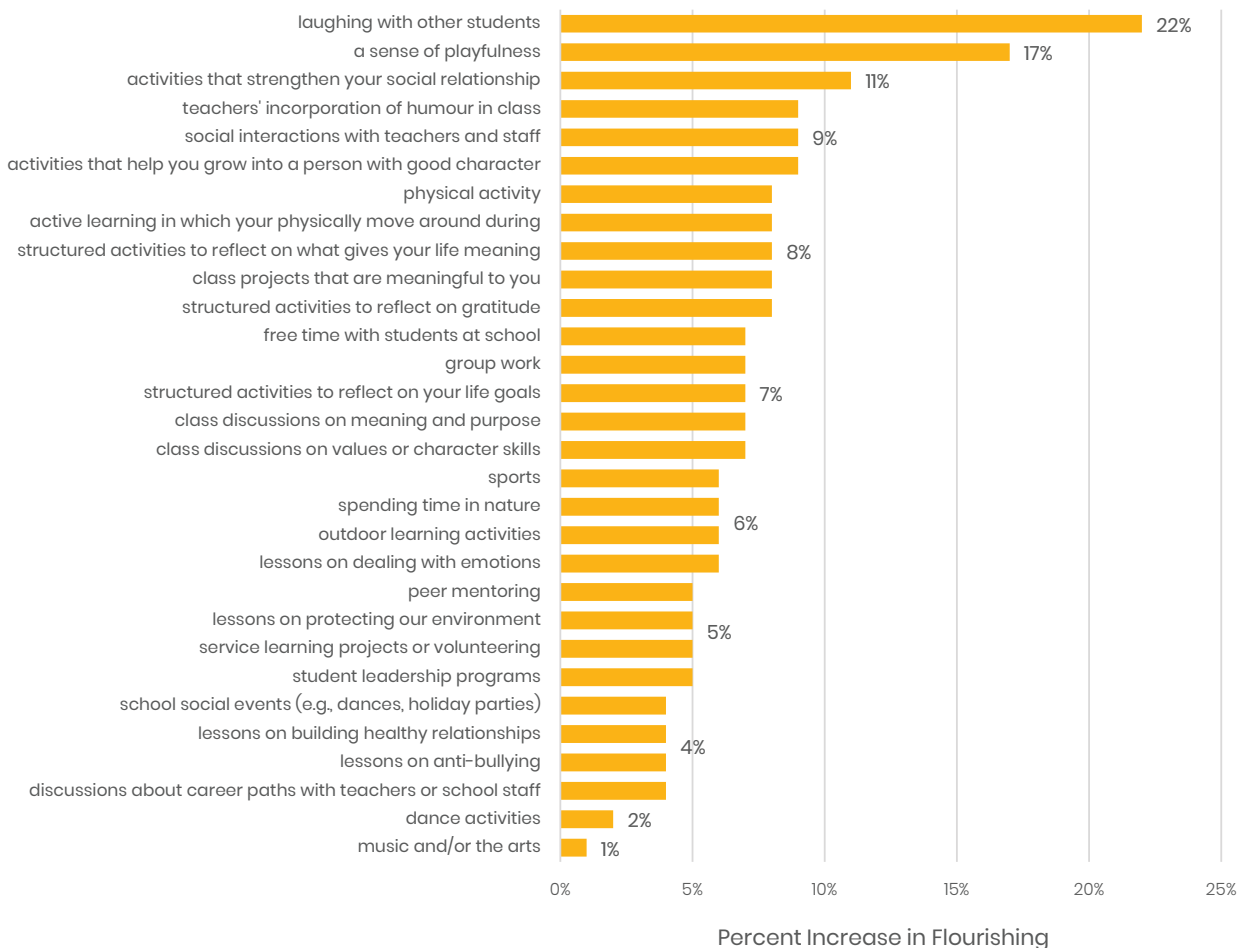
Flourishing scores increase more when engaging in this evidence-based practice at least once a month



Laughing with other students

Figure 7.4

Flourishing scores increase more when engaging in the following evidence based practices at least once a month



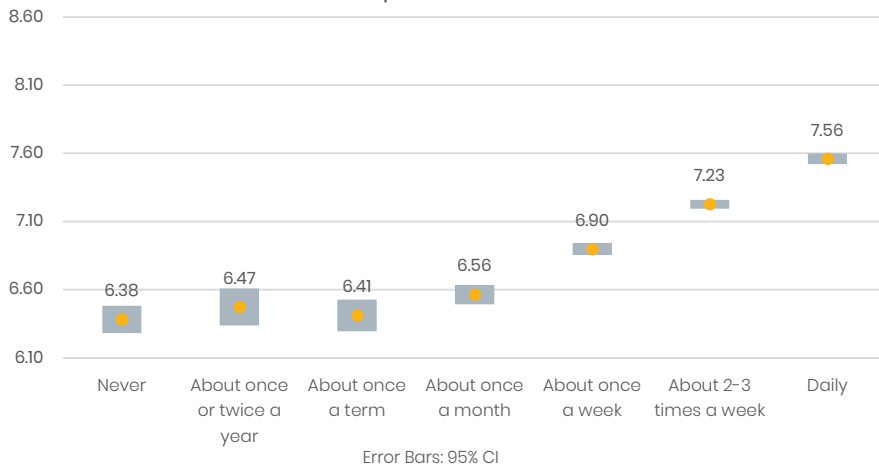
NB. Percentage estimates in Figure 7.4 are derived from longitudinal analyses with multivariate control

Furthermore, it was not only laughing with other students that brought increases in student flourishing scores in this study, but also the use of humour in the classroom by teachers (see Figure 7.4 and Figure 7.5). Student flourishing scores increased by approximately 9% between Wave 1 and Wave 2 when teachers incorporated humour into classroom instruction (see Figure 7.4). Consistent with these longitudinal results, the cross-sectional descriptive data show that student flourishing scores were higher when teachers incorporated humour in class with their students on a daily (7.56) basis and two-three times a week (7.23) compared to when humour was never incorporated (6.38) (see Figure 7.5).

Other studies have identified that humour can support and enhance student flourishing and learning. Neuroscience researchers have found that humour can improve memory and retaining of information in students⁸⁹ whilst other research has shown that resilient secondary students often use humour to de-escalate stressful encounters and experiences and regulate socio-emotional functioning.⁹⁰ It has also been shown that humour can enhance students' learning by encouraging active participation, reducing anxiety, and ultimately improving learning outcomes.⁹¹

Figure 7.5

Average flourishing scores across frequency of Teachers' incorporation of humour in class



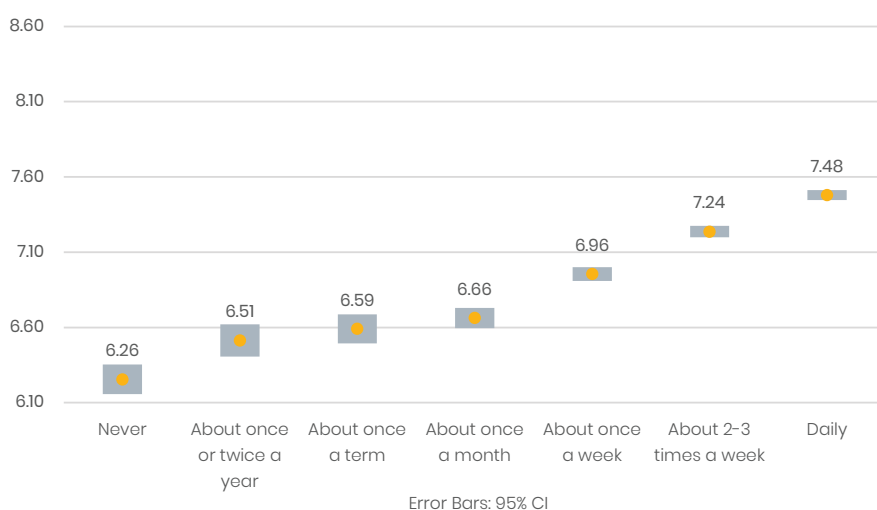
NB. Results in Figure 7.5 are descriptive data only and should not be interpreted causally

Whilst the results in our study's respondent sample are self-reported, the significant rise in student flourishing when these practices were adopted by students is noteworthy and it is recommended that deeper mixed methods investigations into the efficacious role of humour and laughing with others is undertaken in future research relating to flourishing.

Finally, our analyses also identified the importance that strong teacher-student relationships had upon student flourishing. Students who reported engaging in social interactions with teachers and staff at least once a month demonstrated a 9% increase in flourishing scores between Wave 1 and Wave 2 (see Figure 7.6a).

Figure 7.6

Average flourishing scores across frequency of social interactions with teachers and staff



NB. The results presented in Figure 7.6 are based on cross-sectional descriptive data and should not be interpreted causally

Figure 7.5a

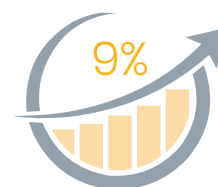
Flourishing scores increase more when engaging in this evidence-based practice at least once a month



Teachers' incorporation of humor in class

Figure 7.6a

Flourishing scores increase more when engaging in this evidence-based practice at least once a month



Social interactions with teachers and staff

These findings confirm that teaching is a deeply relational process. Highly effective teachers create a welcoming presence within their classrooms, and prepare a place for all students to belong as they actively participate in the soulful practices of connection between the teacher, the student and the subject matter that is being taught. Other CSA research studies, including the Relational Schools Project,

confirm the impact that teacher relationships have upon students' wellbeing, school engagement, academic success and overall flourishing.⁹² McLaughlin's research also reminds us that 'learning, relating and belonging are all highly interrelated to wellbeing and attainment'.⁹³

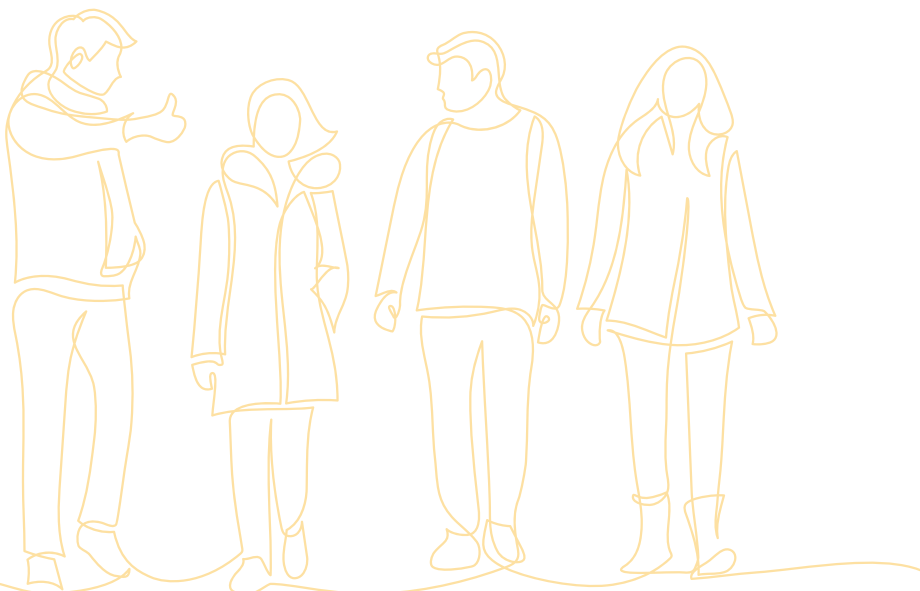
Other studies have also found that relationships with teachers greatly influence student wellbeing⁹⁴ and a meta-analysis of programs that seek to strengthen teacher-student relationships found that practices including praise, emotions coaching, and reflective and supportive listening had highly positive impacts upon student wellbeing.⁹⁵

Summary

These findings underscore the importance of schools creating welcoming, inviting spaces and places for all students to belong and should inspire Christian school leaders and staff to consider ways in which well-belonging can be strengthened across their communities. Such initiatives are most effective when aligned with tightly connected whole-of-school cultures which are embodied within deeply relational networks between students, teachers, and parents. Christian schools therefore have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to contribute to flourishing through belonging within and across tightly woven, highly connected, deeply relational cultures.

Implications for Schools

- » Promote and reinforce the primacy of relationships that are foundational to the entire teaching and learning process. These relationships, student-student, teacher-student, and student-wider community are not peripheral to education but are the integrating thread that ties all effective teaching and learning together.⁹⁶
- » Implement developmentally appropriate and meaningful student support, pastoral care and student mentoring programs across each year level of secondary schooling.
- » Measure the value of student-student and teacher-student relationships and champion the importance of evidencing the extent of relational proximity amongst students and staff. Utilise these measures to identify where relational connections need to be strengthened and supported and also to identify and remediate at-risk behaviours.
- » Cultivate whole-of-school approaches, programs and interventions to student well-belonging that are established upon thriving highly relational school cultures and connected school eco-systems.
- » Cultivate ways to promote a culture of joy, fun and enjoyment amongst staff, students and the wider school community.





Learning: Student Flourishing and Engagement

“The challenges facing education today are ill-served by the insistent drum beat of delivery. Education, in both its principled and pragmatic senses, requires... a more holistic, more humanly fulfilling orientation. Its rigour is relational rather than directive... The outcomes we seek must be matched... by the encounters we encourage and enact in the here and now of lived experience”⁹⁷

An important consideration for student flourishing during the secondary years of schooling pertains to the way students engage in the learning process. Whilst a plethora of internal and external factors impact upon the capacity and readiness for an adolescent to engage in learning, schools that consider the optimal, effective, evidence based, and developmentally appropriate contexts and conditions for learning for students greatly enhance meaningful learning transfer. VanderWeele and Hinton contend that flourishing students have the potential to grow best when situated in flourishing school cultures that cultivate flourishing learning environments. They argue:

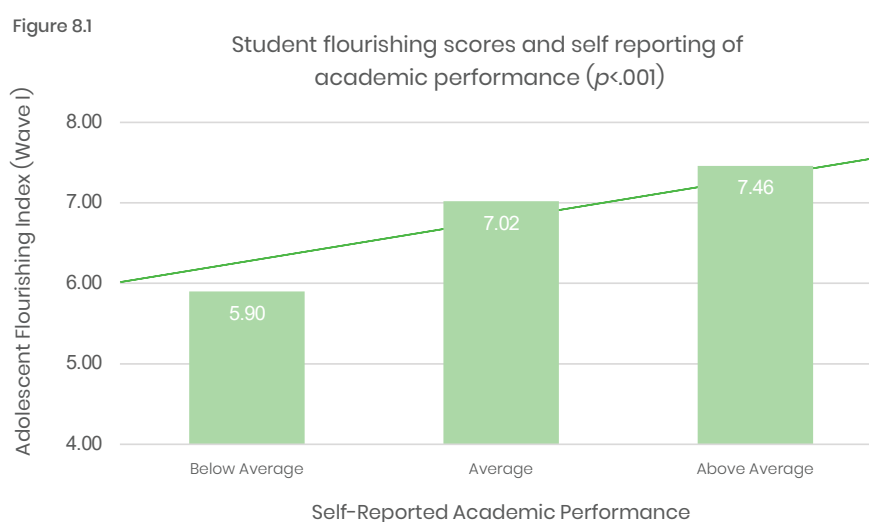
The environment in which a student learns and interacts with others inevitably affects their own present, and future development... a school’s flourishing itself affects students’ learning and flourishing.⁹⁸

There exists a dynamic reciprocity between thriving school cultures and the potential for thriving school students. A truly flourishing school will inevitably include *“the students themselves flourishing... However, relevant also is the flourishing of the school’s teachers, leaders, and other staff... A flourishing school will likely affect both present and future student flourishing and is arguably even constitutive of such flourishing”⁹⁹*

Curren et al. (2024) propose that flourishing students grow in flourishing learning environments and cultures that are intentionally planned, and highly supportive of basic psychological, psychosocial, and neurodevelopmental needs of students. Schools that engage in these imperatives carefully consider flourishing learning contexts and how they can actively improve and optimise learning outcomes for all students within their settings.¹⁰⁰

These learning environments powerfully shape the capacity for both present and future flourishing in students. Such considerations also recognise that flourishing is impacted by a complex web of not only teachers, curriculum and learning contexts, but also by the student’s own capacities and skills, home environments, and by parents, friends and significant others.¹⁰¹

Descriptive analyses found that student flourishing across this study was significantly higher for those who reported higher academic performance at school (see Figure 8.1). While these findings are based on subjective self-reports rather than objective measures, the data suggest that students who perceive themselves as performing better academically also show higher levels of flourishing.

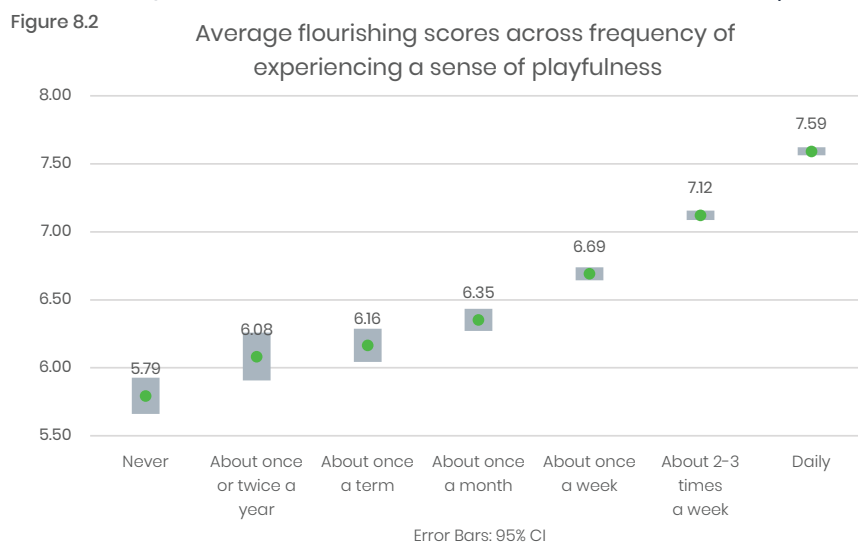


NB. Results on this graph are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

Research supports the explicit links between self-efficacy and academic achievement, and student flourishing during their adolescent years.¹⁰² A key aspect of developing self-efficacy is that teachers should endeavour to foreground intrinsic goal framing (e.g. personal growth) within learning tasks rather than solely extrinsic goal framing (e.g. to pass the test). This enhances the capacity for students to value both the learning tasks as well as the utility in what they are learning, without reducing their motivation to engage.¹⁰³

Playfulness and Playful Pedagogies

Figure 8.3 displays the results of the modified outcome-wide longitudinal design. Student flourishing scores increased by 17% from Wave 1 to Wave 2 among students who reported that teachers enacted a sense of playfulness. The cross-sectional descriptive data presented in Figure 8.2 also indicated a positive trend between frequency of teacher enacted playfulness and student flourishing scores, with the highest student flourishing scores observed when this was practiced daily.



NB. The results presented in Figure 8.2 are based on cross-sectional descriptive data and should not be interpreted causally

Figure 8.3 Flourishing scores increase more when engaging in the following evidence based practices at least once a month

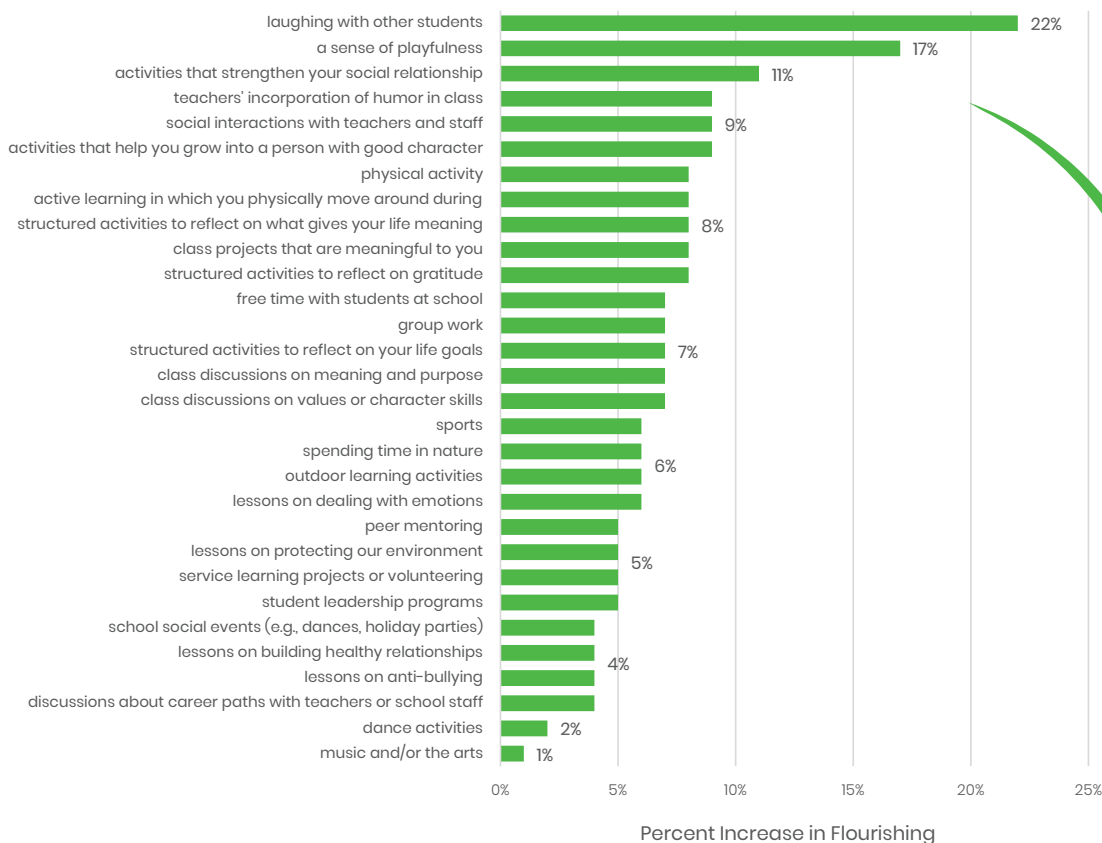
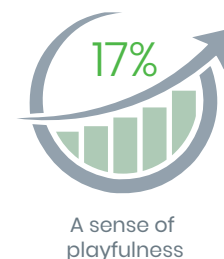


Figure 8.3a Flourishing increases when engaging in this evidence-based practice at least once a month



NB. Percentage estimates in Figure 8.3 are derived from longitudinal analyses with multivariate control

Researchers have found that encouraging play in school can greatly enhance student wellbeing, and improve social connections, physical and mental health, character skills as well as learning and classroom motivation.¹⁰⁴ Based upon the results of this study, and the significance of the increase evidenced in student flourishing, it is recommended that further investigations are undertaken to determine how playful pedagogies can be effectively used within secondary school contexts to enhance student flourishing and learning outcomes.

Physical Activity and Active Learning

Our analyses also found that physical activity and providing opportunities for students to engage in active learning were significantly associated with student flourishing scores. Statically significant differences were found in student flourishing scores based on the number of days students were active in the past week (see Figure 8.4). Modified longitudinal outcome-wide analyses, with multivariate controls, suggest that student flourishing scores increase by 8% for students who engaged in physical activity and active learning practices at least once a month (see Figure 8.3). Cross sectional descriptive data presented in Figure 8.5 also indicated a positive trend between frequency of active learning and student flourishing scores, with the highest student flourishing scores observed when this was practiced daily.

Figure 8.4 Physical Health: student flourishing scores across days of physical activity (at least 30 mins, each day) ($p < .001$)

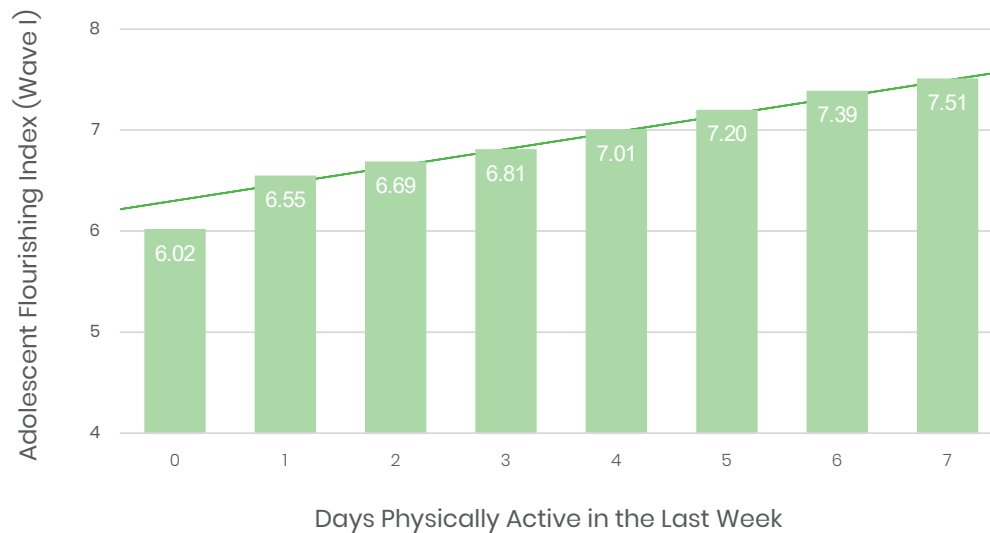
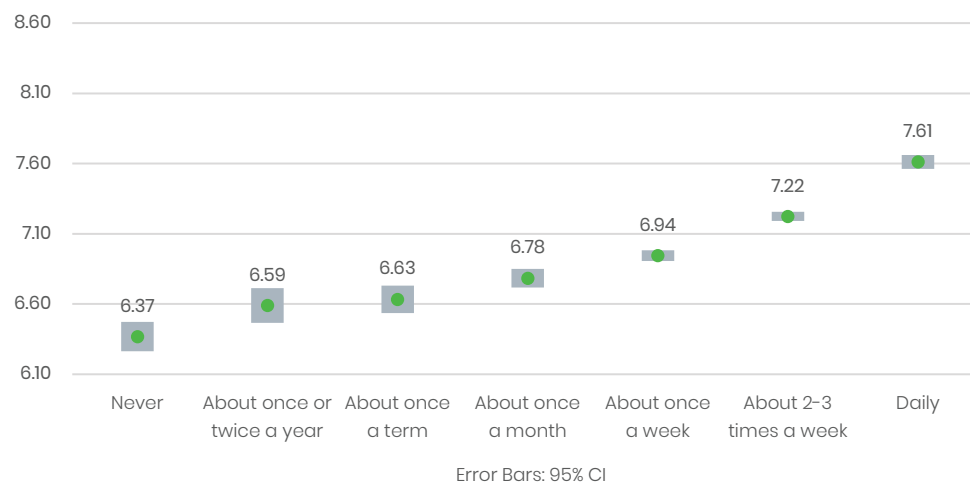


Figure 8.5 Average flourishing scores across frequency of experiencing active learning



NB. Results in Figures 8.4 and 8.5 are cross-sectional data only and should not be interpreted casually

Related research confirms that physical activity has significant physical, psychosocial, and mental health benefits for adolescents. Studies undertaken across the OECD found that students who took part in some moderate or vigorous physical activity were less likely to feel very anxious about tests, less likely to feel like an outsider at school, and less likely to be frequently bullied at school than students who did not engage in physical activity.¹⁰⁵ In an age where sedentary lifestyles are becoming more common, and where many school systems are reducing or eradicating physical activity from a congested curriculum, these findings highlight the importance of physical exercise and active learning in the promotion and enhancement of student flourishing.

Summary

Engagement in learning by students is a vital element of an effective and flourishing school community. Numerous studies support our findings regarding the impact and enduring benefits of learning engagement and the role that playfulness, playful pedagogies, active learning, and physical activity can have upon overall student flourishing. Furthermore, the active cultivation of learning engagement, using these practices and other dynamic learning activities, works most effectively when implemented within school cultures where flourishing emphases is an integral thread within every lesson, every program, and every conversation.

Implications for Schools

- » Implement whole-of-school learning frameworks that share common vocabulary, engaging and creative evidence-based learning approaches, and a common vision regarding holistic measures of growth and development for student flourishing.
- » Seek to be innovative and creative with the use of play pedagogies across the secondary school and incorporate active learning into classroom routines and practices where possible.
- » Prioritise the flourishing of whole-of-school cultures that pay attention to dynamic and meaningful ways to cultivate the flourishing of all staff and their working and learning environments.
- » Prioritise within the secondary curricular and co-curricular program an allocation of time for dedicated physical activity. The World Health Organisation recommends a minimum of 1 hour per day physical activity for adolescents, yet the OECD average has dropped in most countries to less than 1 hour per week.¹⁰⁶
- » Actively promote benefits of active learning engagement across the school community and showcase these through case studies/vignettes of effective practice.





Spirituality: Student Flourishing and Faith Formation

“It is in these sacred spaces that faith is nurtured—faith that can instil a deeper sense of meaning and purpose to help ground the meaninglessness that overcomes so many people. It is in religious community that the message of hope...can push against the despair that drives so much suffering and premature death. And it is in religious community that the love of God and love of neighbor can take root, offering a radical alternative to the divisions that threaten to shred our homes, our communities, our nation, and our world”¹⁰⁷

In the public discourse relating to education policy and adolescent growth and development over the past 60 years, the role and impact of faith, religion and spirituality on adolescents has been a somewhat underdeveloped field. Yet, for a large majority of the world’s population, spirituality and religiosity are perceived to be an elemental dimension of any true human flourishing.¹⁰⁸ Over the past decade, there has been renewed interest in the importance of the transcendent in human flourishing more broadly and in adolescent flourishing in particular. Centres like the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard have been committed to exploring the significant role that religion and spirituality serve in human flourishing.

A growing body of research is identifying the positive benefits of religion and spirituality to the development of flourishing in young people.¹⁰⁹ It is important to also recognise that some religious communities and Christian school experiences can also be the source of deep hurt, disappointment, and pain for students. This is especially evident when there is coercion, control or a disconnect between what is said and what is practiced across every aspect of a school or church community.

However, numerous studies have also found religious practices can greatly enhance student flourishing across many indicators including mental and physical health, overall life satisfaction, as well as providing an overarching sense of meaning and purpose.¹¹⁰

Whilst the church and formal religion are key institutions in this faith development and formation, Christian schools are well-placed to contribute to student flourishing through holistic spiritual formation.¹¹¹ Christian schools that aim to promote the spiritual formation of all students must have the opportunity to be explicit and intentional in this approach, embodying what they believe authentically and consistently through practices, behaviours and beliefs across the entire school community.

The findings relating to Australian Christian schools’ faith formation practices that facilitate and enhance student flourishing are outlined in this section. These findings provide evidence of the important role that spirituality and belief in God have upon student flourishing and the specific types of practices that increase overall flourishing in young people.

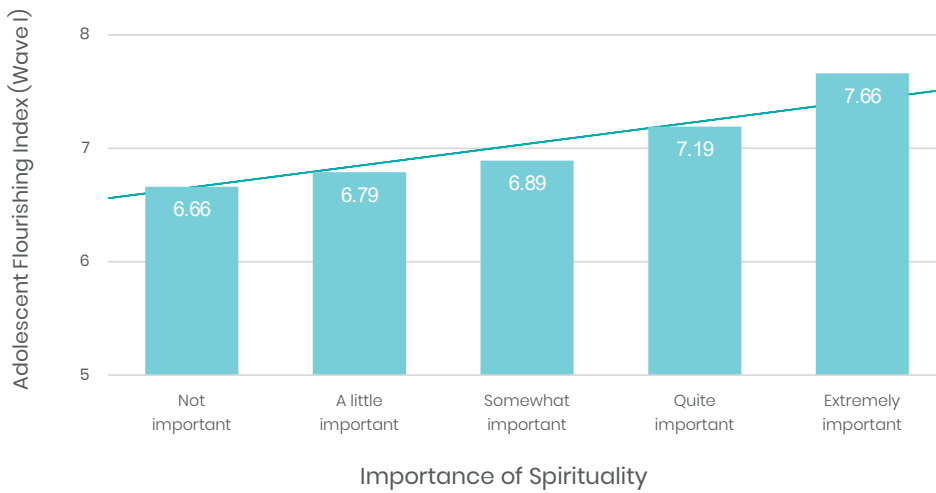
The analyses identified that student flourishing scores differed significantly based on the perceived importance of spirituality (see Figure 9.1). Students who rate spirituality as important or extremely important reported higher flourishing scores compared to those who considered it less important. Although confounding variables and contextual factors (e.g. family background) may influence these results, the observed differences in flourishing scores are notable. We also explored flourishing scores and the perceived importance of spirituality by gender, observing similar patterns for both boys and girls (see Figure 9.2).

These findings reflect a growing longing in adolescents for a sense of the transcendent. For many young people, they have grown up immersed in a world that has been stripped of anything beyond the material realm, or what philosopher Charles Taylor has identified as the “immanent frame”.¹¹² This absence has spawned an overwhelming sense of what he terms “disenchantment”, particularly amongst people living in western cultures.¹¹³ Increasingly, and somewhat against the secularised trends in western cultures towards abandoning formalised religion, young people are again beginning to value the importance of spirituality and transcendence, as is evidenced in recent studies.¹¹⁴ The findings identified within our

study are worthy of further investigation and analysis, especially in regard to delineating the impact of Christian schooling, on the results pertaining to spirituality. This is an underdeveloped research area within the field of student flourishing which could yield new understanding of these emerging trends.¹¹⁵

Figure 9.1

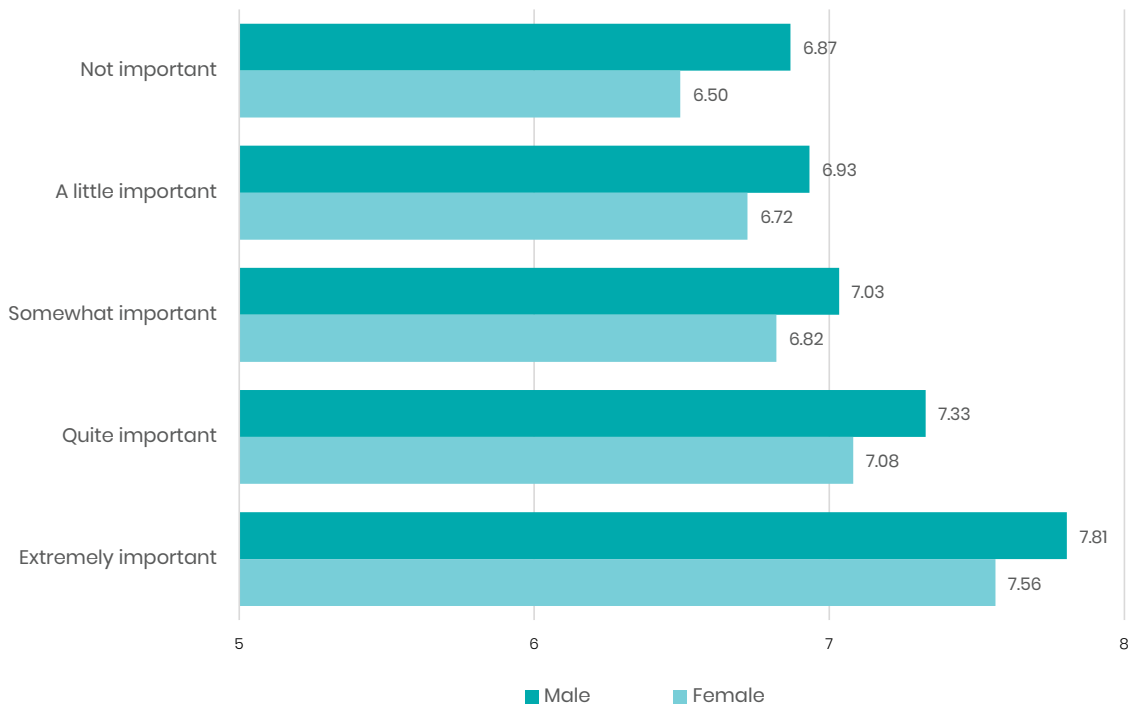
Student flourishing scores and importance of spirituality ($p < .001$)



NB. Results in Figure 9.1 are cross-sectional analyses only and should not be interpreted causally

Figure 9.2

Student flourishing scores and importance of spirituality by gender

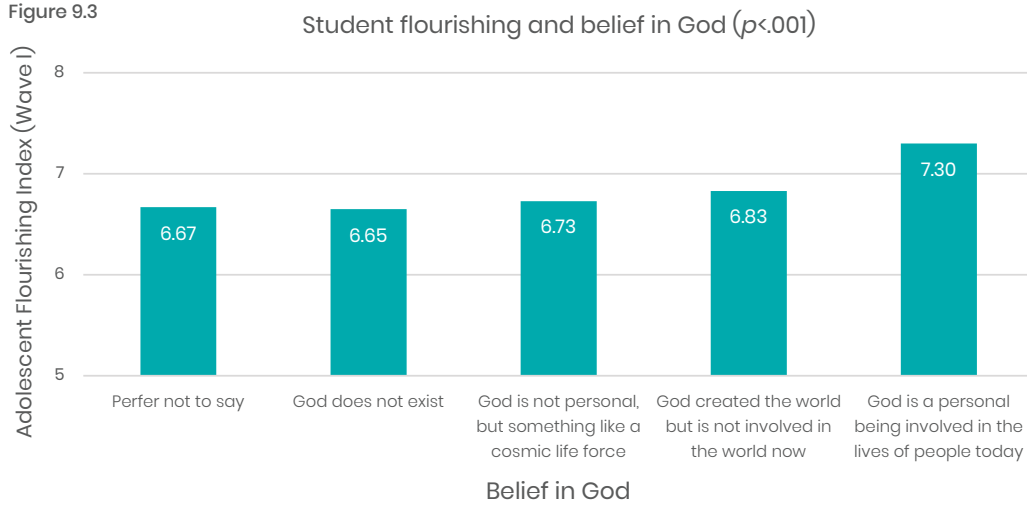


NB. Results in Figure 9.2 are descriptive only and should not be interpreted causally

Further cross-sectional analyses revealed that student flourishing scores differed significantly based on students' specific conception of God (see Figure 9.3). We found that students who believe in a conception of God as a personal being involved in the lives of people today have higher flourishing scores compared to students with other conceptions of God. Of note was the minimal differences in student flourishing scores by students who did not believe in God (6.65), or preferred not to say (6.67), and those who believed in a cosmic life force (6.73) or a distant and aloof conception of God (6.83). In contrast, higher flourishing scores (7.30) were observed for students who reported belief in a personal God. This suggests that student flourishing and belief may not be an arbitrary and amorphous transcendent belief, but may be enhanced by the conception and type of God that is believed in. Further investigations into these descriptive results are required to explore in deeper ways the variables impacting on these initial and statistically significant findings.



Figure 9.3

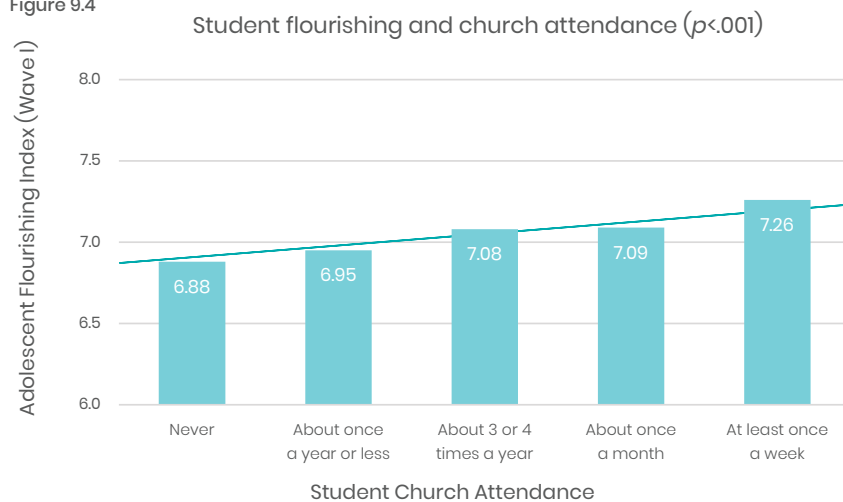


NB. Results in Figure 9.3 are cross-sectional analyses only and should not be interpreted casually

Church Service Attendance and Adolescent Flourishing

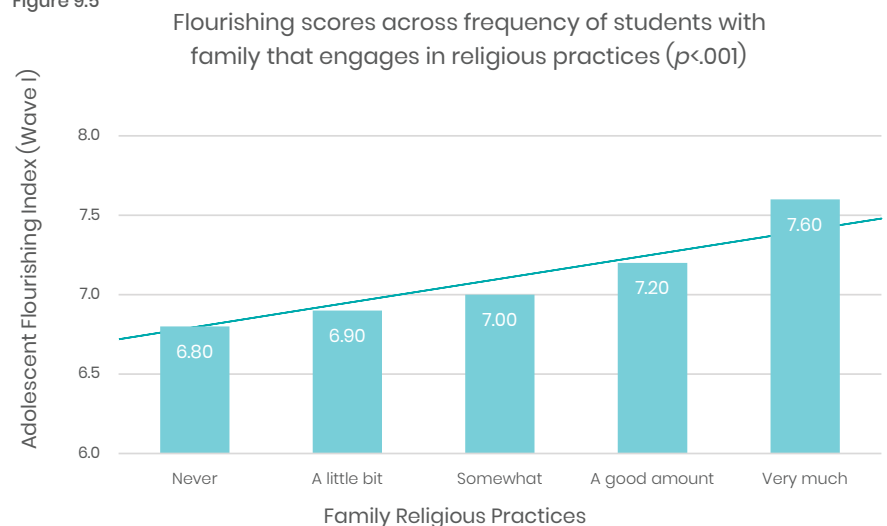
We further analysed the role of religion and spirituality upon student flourishing scores by investigating whether there were links between frequency of church attendance and student flourishing. Cross-sectional analyses showed significant differences in student flourishing scores based on the frequency of attending religious services, with students attending once a week reporting higher flourishing scores (7.26) (see Figure 9.4). We found only very minimal increases in flourishing scores when church attendance was about once a year (6.95) when compared to those who did not attend a church

Figure 9.4



during the year (6.88) (see Figure 9.4). These results are descriptive only and further investigations into additional variables that may influence these outcomes is recommended. Researchers have identified that regular church attendance is associated with a range of improved flourishing outcomes that include higher life satisfaction, increased volunteering, greater levels of gratitude and forgiveness, and lower probabilities of drug use, in comparison to not attending church services.¹¹⁶

Figure 9.5



NB. Results in Figures 9.4 and 9.5 are cross-sectional analyses only and should not be interpreted casually

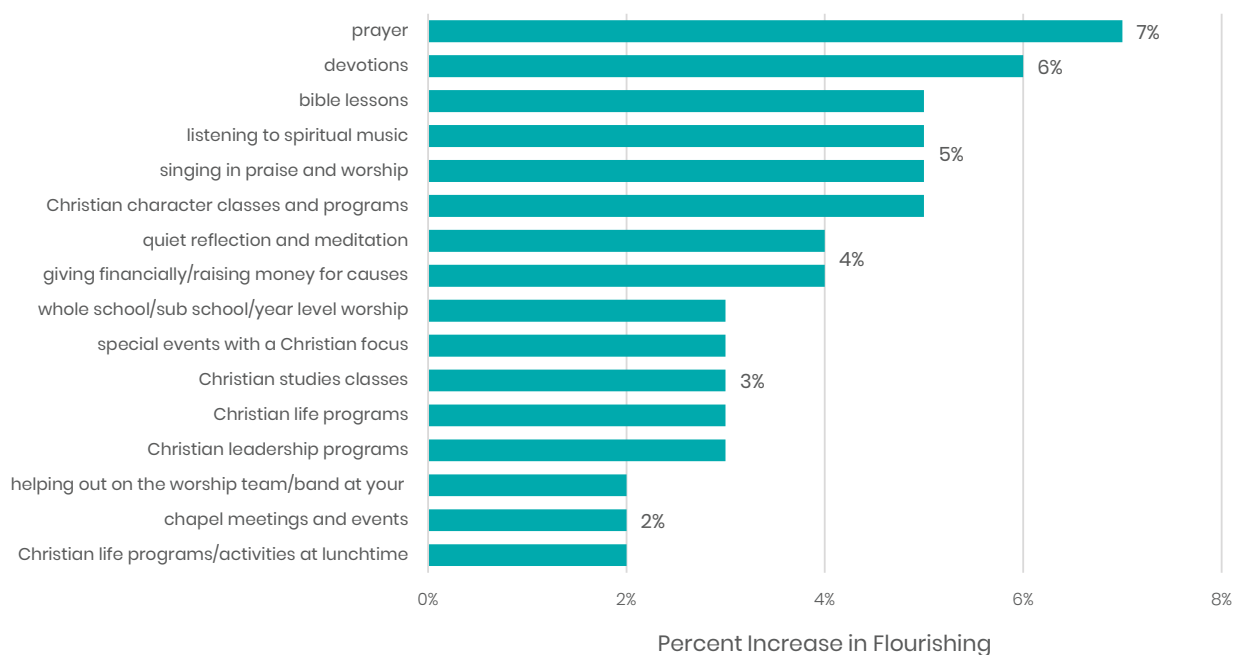
Furthermore, we examined whether students who reported more frequent family engagement in religious practices also reported differences in their flourishing scores. We found that student flourishing scores were higher when students' families were perceived to consistently practice their faith "very much" (7.60) or a "good amount" (7.20) compared to students who either never saw religious practices engaged by their families (6.80) or where these practices were infrequent (6.90) (see Figure 9.5). Other research relating to student flourishing supports these findings and indicates that families that dedicate time to religious practices in the raising of their children are encouraging, reinforcing, and modelling important psychological, psychosocial, and mental health benefits that will shape their children's lives into adulthood.¹⁷

Specific Christian Practices and Student Flourishing

As an explicit part of this study's research design and methodology, we also sought to analyse a range of specifically Christian practices and the impact these might have upon student flourishing. Prior to designing the research survey, we hosted forum groups with selected Australian Christian school leaders to ascertain a list of common practices that were being adopted by Christian school communities regarding student faith formation. We also did an extensive review of the literature on Christian practices which informed our final selection of Christian practices that were included in the survey.

Students responded to the frequency they engaged or demonstrated these practices, and these data analyses formed "natural experiments" across schools based on the frequency in which various practices were implemented. The longitudinal comparison of changes in the flourishing of students over time across schools with different practices (in both waves of survey responses) with estimates derived from analyses with multivariate control provided evidence as to the effectiveness of the practices in promoting flourishing. The following discussion outlines the Christian practices that had a higher impact upon student flourishing across our sample (see Figure 9.6).

Figure 9.6 Flourishing scores increase more when engaging in the following evidence-based practices at least once a month



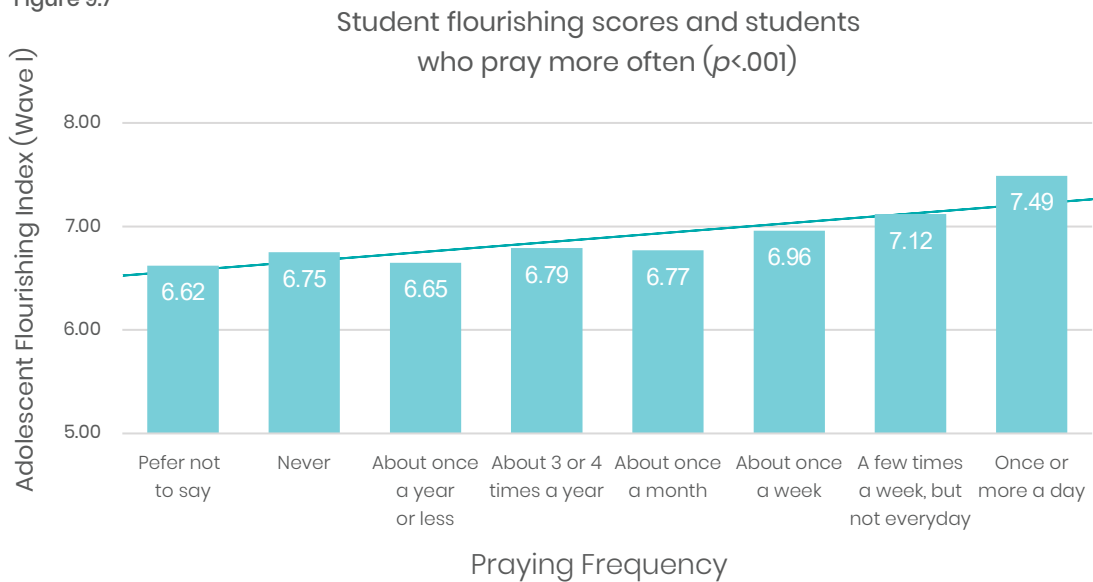
NB. Figure 9.6 shows results derived from longitudinal analyses with multivariate control

The Practice and Frequency of Prayer

We found that the highest increase in student flourishing scores from Wave 1 to Wave 2 (7%) occurred when students engaged in the practice of prayer at least once a month (see Figure 9.6). The cross-sectional descriptive analyses presented in Figure 9.7 also showed significant differences in flourishing scores based on frequency of prayer. Students who reported praying once or more a day (7.49) had much higher overall flourishing scores than students who either did not pray at all (6.75) or prayed infrequently (6.65) during the year.



Figure 9.7



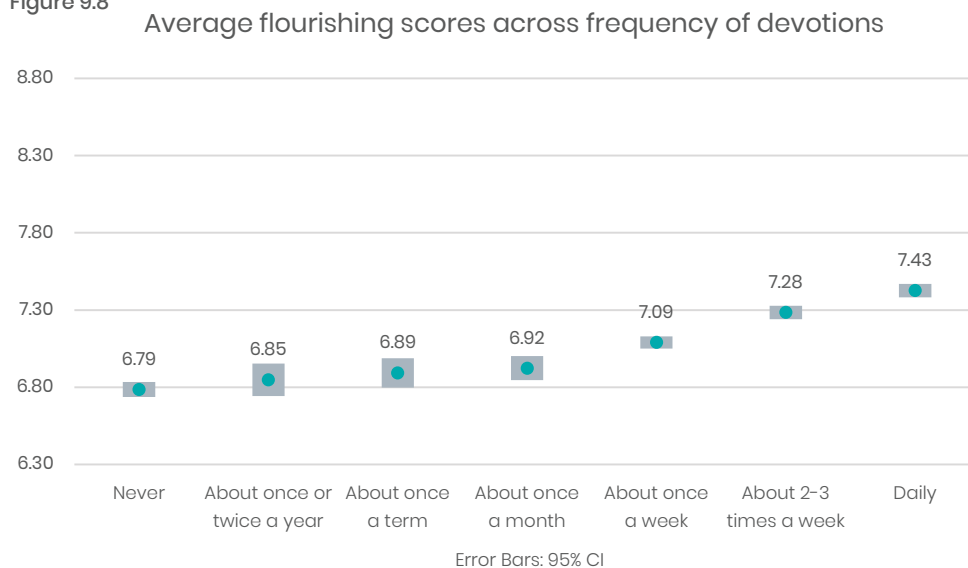
NB. Results in Figure 9.7 are cross-sectional analyses only and should not be interpreted causally

These findings are reinforced in other research that has found the “frequency of personal prayer is a much stronger predictor than frequency of church attendance in respect of spiritual wellbeing. This finding is consistent with the view that personal prayer is a key factor in the formation of individual spirituality.”¹¹⁸ The practice of personal prayer has also been linked to life satisfaction, wellbeing and other dimensions of flourishing in both adults and adolescents.¹¹⁹

The Practice and Frequency of Personal Devotions

We also identified that the practice of personal devotions (which often includes personal prayer, reflection, and/or a scripted devotional reading/Bible reading) increased overall student flourishing scores by 6% (see Figure 9.6). A positive pattern was observed between the frequency of engaging in personal devotions and student flourishing. Students who reported engaging in daily personal devotions had higher flourishing scores (7.43) compared to those who reported never engaging in the practice (6.79) (see Figure 9.8). These findings are also supported in related studies on the spiritual practices that contribute to student flourishing which have found that daily religious experiences (e.g. personal devotions) are directly associated with lower levels of adolescent delinquency and anxiety and constitutive of flourishing.¹²⁰ Other research suggests the important role that Christian schools play in setting cultures that are conducive to these practices being adopted in students and the vital links between public expressions of Christian school norms and values and private devotional activities in adolescents.¹²¹

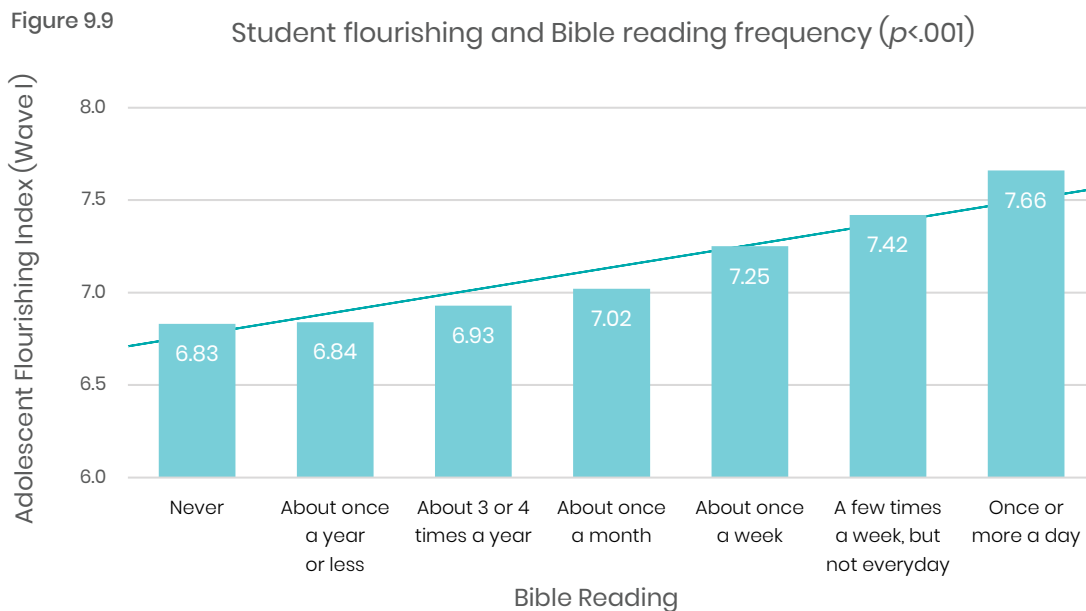
Figure 9.8



NB. Results in Figure 9.8 are cross-sectional data only and should not be interpreted causally

The Practice and Frequency of Personal Bible Reading/Bible Lessons

Another practice we identified that associated with higher flourishing scores was the practice and frequency of personal Bible reading.



NB. Results in Figure 9.9 are cross-sectional analyses only and should not be interpreted causally

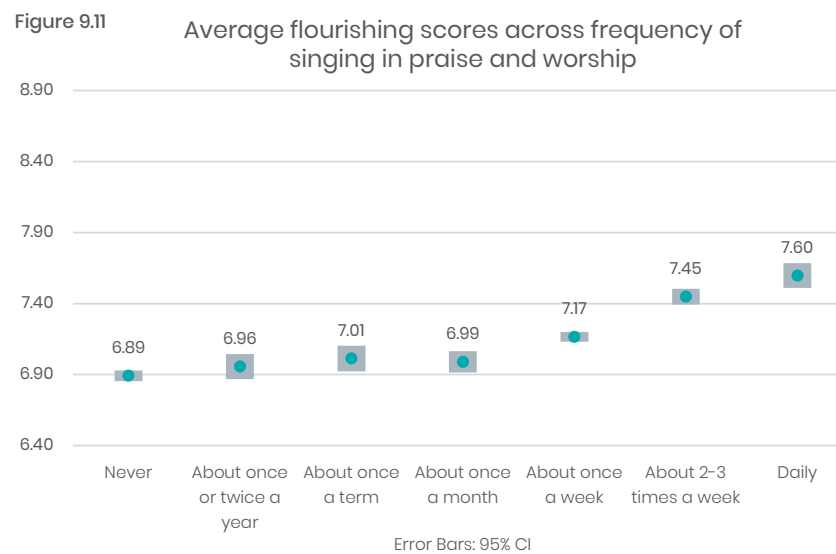
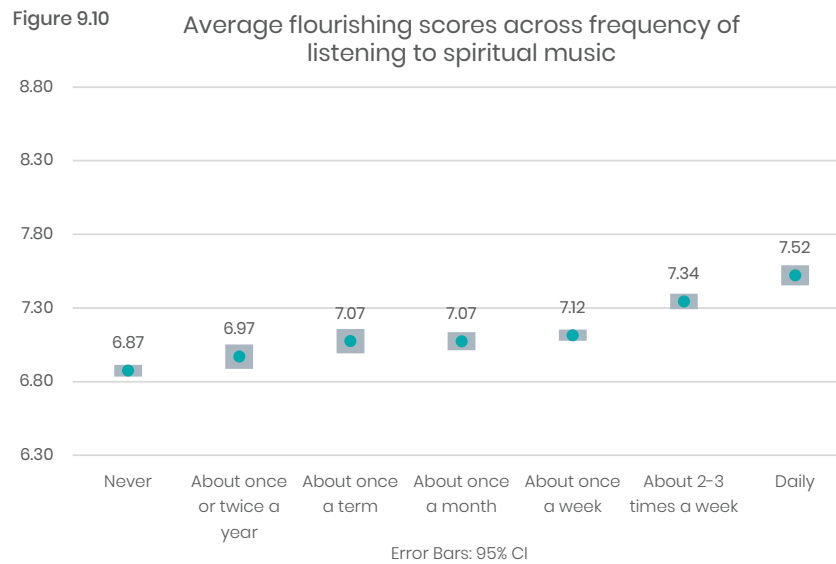
Figure 9.9 reveals that student flourishing is significantly higher for students who read the Bible daily (7.66) than those students who do not engage in this practice at all (6.83). A similar pattern was observed for students who read the Bible once a week (7.25) compared to students who never engaged in the practice (6.83). We also found in our longitudinal analyses that there was an increase in flourishing of 5% when students engaged in some form of Bible lesson/Bible reading activity (see Figure 9.6). These findings would appear to support the importance of Bible reading and Bible lessons for student flourishing and the link between personal faith and engaging in regular spiritual practices like Bible reading to grow and develop that faith. Further investigation into these correlations and related variables are therefore recommended.

The Practice and Frequency of Listening to Spiritual Music and Singing

Another significant finding arising from our descriptive data analyses identified the role that listening to spiritual music and singing in praise and worship as engaged and enacted Christian practices appeared to have upon student flourishing. Students who reported listening to spiritual music daily (7.52) had higher student flourishing scores compared with students who never engaged in this practice (6.87) or only engaged 1–2 times per year (6.97) (see Figure 9.10). Similar findings were also identified for students who sang in daily praise and worship (7.60) compared to those students who did not engage in singing in praise and worship (6.89) (see Figure 9.11).

Furthermore, specific class, year level and whole school worship services, events and experiences (3%), and helping with the chapel/worship team at school (2%) was also associated with positive increases in student flourishing within this study. Many Christian schools in Australia assign value to listening to spiritual music through daily devotions, personal, school-led devotions, pastoral care classes, praise and worship and congregational singing. Furthermore, many students enjoy serving in rostered groups during chapel services and other scheduled events and activities that are often led by student musicians and singers. The practices of listening to spiritual music and singing in praise and worship were identified as increasing student flourishing by 5%, when analysed using the longitudinal data using multivariate controls (see Figure 9.6).



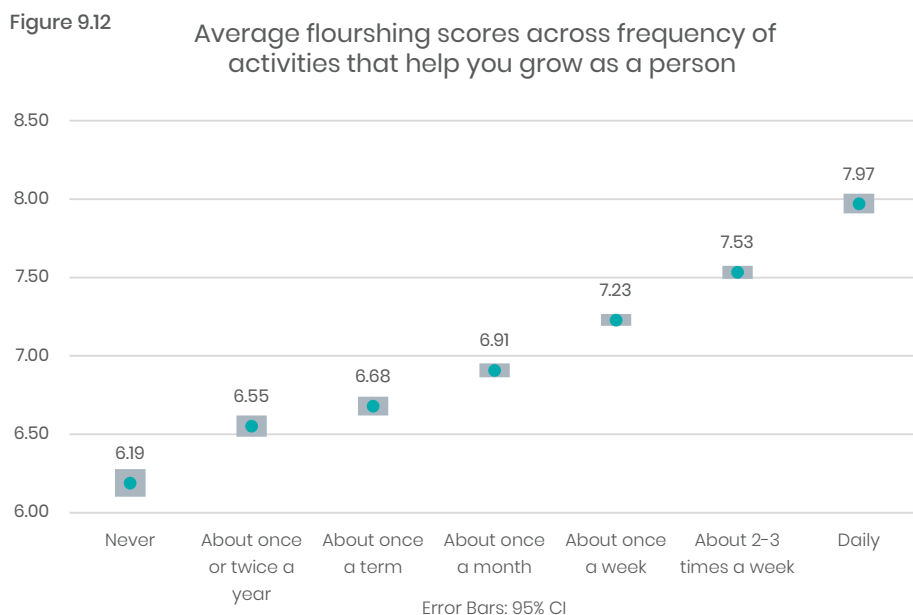


NB. Results in Figures 9.10 and 9.11 are cross-sectional data only and should not be interpreted causally

There is increasing evidence from other research that listening and participating in music and singing in general plays a positive role in many facets of student wellbeing and flourishing. Participation in music and the impact of music upon flourishing have been linked to higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, better social connections, the development of character, and improved overall mental and physical health.¹²² Other studies have identified that listening to specifically religious music has been associated with higher flourishing and subsequent life satisfaction.¹²³ These positive findings regarding listening to spiritual music and singing in praise and worship are worthy of more rigorous investigation in what is still an underdeveloped research field in the literature regarding student flourishing.

The Practice and Frequency of Christian Character and Virtues Programs

Another key practice that was identified in our analyses was the important role that Christian character programs play in enhancing student flourishing in Australian Christian schools. The longitudinal data analyses with multivariate controls identified that Christian character classes and programs had a positive effect on student flourishing with increases between Wave 1 and Wave 2 of 5% (see Figure 9.6). Cross-sectional descriptive data also demonstrated a positive trend between student flourishing and activities that assist adolescents to grow into a person of good character, which are often embedded into the curriculum and learning experiences of Christian character formation classes (see Figure 9.12). We observed that when these activities were undertaken daily, student flourishing (7.97) was higher compared to students who reported these were not done at all (6.19) (see Figure 9.12). Formal Christian studies classes (3%) and Christian life and formation programs (3%) as well as Christian life activities and programs during lunchtimes (2%) also were shown to have a positive impact through our longitudinal analyses of both survey responses (see Figure 9.6).



NB. Results in Figure 9.12 are cross-sectional data only and should not be interpreted causally

These findings support the importance of explicit Christian character, virtues, and values programs in cultivating student flourishing and faith formation with adolescents. A large body of research has identified the vital impact these types of programs have in adolescent development. These programs, when integrated with explicit teaching on character traits and social-emotional attitudes and behaviours, have been shown to positively impact upon a diverse range of flourishing outcomes including social relationships, kindness, thankfulness, resilience, courage and overall life satisfaction.¹²⁴ These programs also minimise the negative aspects of mental health and have been found to contribute to lower rates of depression, anxiety, social isolation and bullying.¹²⁵

It has also been identified that school staff who embody the character and behaviours that Christian living programs espouse, and who authentically engage students within these programs have a transformative impact on student faith formation.¹²⁶ This modelling of Christian character was seen to be most effective when it was not limited to isolated personal development lessons but evidenced across every subject and every aspect of the school community. Christian character programs can also enhance the wellbeing and flourishing of the broader community through providing opportunities to serve, a theme we will explore in more detail in the next section.

Summary

Our analyses of the types of Christian practices that contribute to the greatest increases in student flourishing highlight the importance and efficacy of both personal and school-based spiritual practices in the flourishing of adolescents. Our longitudinal analyses revealed that many other Christian practices commonly adopted in Christian schools had positive impacts on student flourishing.

To be effective in promoting student flourishing, this process of faith formation and Christian practices within Christian school communities must consider far more than simply a transactional impartation of content, ideas, and information. James KA Smith challenges Christian school communities to imagine a bigger story for the formation of young people than merely information transfer when he posits:

What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions – our vision of “the good life” – and not merely the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work of education was the transforming of the imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect?¹²⁷

To ensure that our Christian schools are committed to the transforming of the imagination, the work of spiritual formation in our students must be deeply aligned and seamlessly integrated with core values and beliefs within a school community. These find expression through the diverse symbiotic network



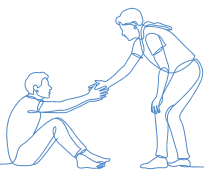
of rhythms, relationships, routines and practices that are more often “caught” than just “taught” and then consequently “sought” by students.¹²⁸ The transformative influence of faith formation practices necessitates an explicit embodying and living out of these ideas, virtues and values in deeply authentic and engaging ways across the entire school community.

Finally, Long and VanderWeele (2023) conclude that the evidence regarding the overwhelmingly positive impact and benefits of faith and religious communities on young people “*might also be one of the most important resources in our time*”¹²⁹ with regards to improving student flourishing in our current cultural moment.

Implications for Schools

- » Articulate a clear vision and whole-of-school framework for student spiritual formation.
- » Conduct a review of current practices considering these evidence-based findings. Map formational opportunities across all areas of school life and identify areas of strength and need across the school community.
- » Adopt a flourishing holistic formation masterplan and cultivate a wider school culture that models and facilitates healthy formation for all students.
- » Ensure camps, community events, and other co-curricular activities are strategically planned to contribute to student formation and make explicit the spiritual formation components for every camp, events and core activity.
- » Facilitate training opportunities for staff to deepen their biblical literacy and communicate Christian values and beliefs in a culturally contextual manner.
- » Ensure teaching and learning frameworks and pedagogical approaches are also designed to promote flourishing and healthy holistic formation, grounded within a well-articulated Christian worldview.
- » Encourage staff to act as mentors and guides for adolescents. Similarly, encourage students to mentor younger year levels in core values and beliefs.
- » Promote and celebrate regular opportunities for praise and worship and singing to be part of the school’s weekly rhythms and routines.





Service: Student Flourishing and Civic and Social Engagement

“Education...practices that prepare students to foster their own wellbeing alone are insufficient for flourishing. Ideally education for flourishing would include...practices that will equip students to care for themselves as well as make contributions to others and the wider world.”¹³⁰

The final theme that was identified in the longitudinal analyses of the data was the impact that practices relating to service-learning has upon student flourishing. An integral aspect of intentional faith formation in Christian schooling is service to the community, as well as civic and social engagement. Service and social engagement should not be seen only as an extracurricular activity, rather as central to a Christian vision of holistic education. CSA’s collaborative work, *Australian Schools and the Common Good*, highlighted schools explicitly shape citizens not just for knowledge transfer but also imbue to students a particular set of civic virtues, values, behaviours, and attitudes.¹³¹

Christian formation is ultimately intended for application and marked by a humble heart of service and a deep love for others. As students grow in their holistic formation, the evidence will inevitably be seen in their behaviour and actions. Central to this formation is a commitment to service which affirms that all people are created for shalom—a sense of wholeness, delight in, and flourishing of relationships that have been fully reconciled—with God, with our self, with others, and with creation.¹³² Christian schools have long been involved in hospitality and service-related activities with an expectation that students would lead lives of faithfulness that extend to their neighbourhoods and wider communities.

For students, research has found that learning through service and volunteering opportunities has a significant impact upon flourishing.¹³³ Academically, service-learning has been linked to greater levels of student achievement, as well as increased motivation and greater satisfaction with their learning experiences.¹³⁴ A meta-analysis of the impact of service-learning across 62 studies demonstrated positive gains in social skills, student achievement, and more positive attitudes towards self, school, and learning.¹³⁵

For Christian school graduates, related research findings also identify that their commitment to service, civic engagement, and generosity of both time and resources to civic activities, including volunteering, hospitality, service and giving, was proportionally higher than graduates from government and other non-government school sectors.¹³⁶ Such outcomes highlight an intentional formation of students within Christian schools towards a public facing posture that seeks to locate their personal stories in a grander story of service and love of neighbour.

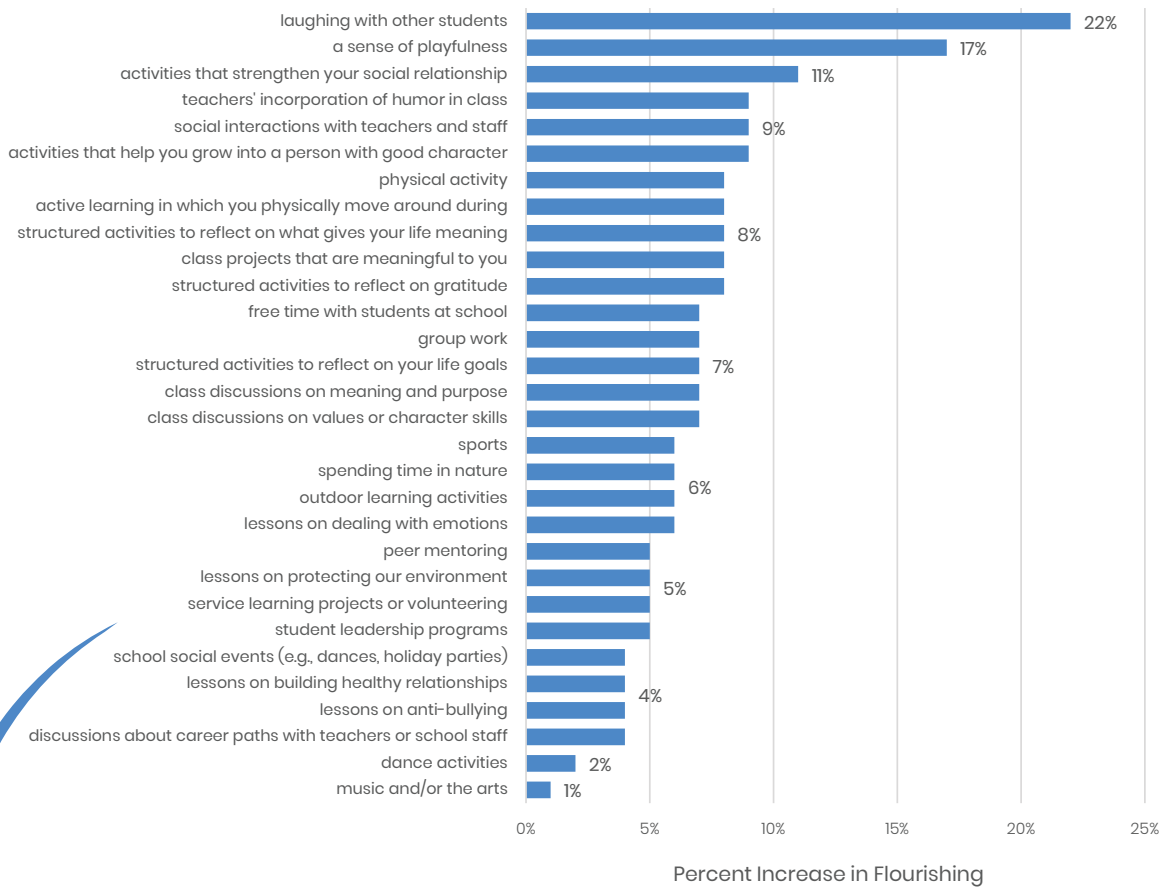
As we analysed the longitudinal data across for this study, we identified that service-learning projects and volunteering had an increase of 5% on overall student flourishing when these types of practices were undertaken at least monthly (see Figure 10.1a). Closely related to these practices were structured activities that encouraged students to reflect on the virtue of gratitude (8%) (see Figure 10.1b) and giving financially/raising money for specific causes monthly (4%) (see Figure 10.1c). These positive increases in student flourishing are noteworthy within the context of this study and are closely aligned to a broader understanding of service and civic engagement that is public facing and altruistic. The World Happiness Report reinforces this imperative for schools and student flourishing by stating:

Experimental and other evidence shows that when people’s wellbeing increases, they can become more altruistic. In particular, when people’s wellbeing rises through experiencing altruistic help, they become more likely to help others, creating a virtuous spiral.¹³⁷



Figure 10.1

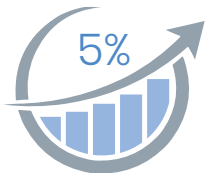
Flourishing score increases when engaging in the following evidence-based practices at least once a month



Estimates for Figure 10.1 derived from longitudinal analyses with multivariate control

Figure 10.1a

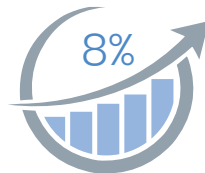
Flourishing scores are more when engaging in this evidence-based practice at least once a month



Service learning projects or volunteering

Figure 10.1b

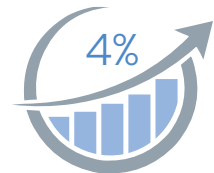
Flourishing scores are more when engaging in this evidence-based practice at least once a month



Structured activities to reflect on gratitude

Figure 10.1c

Flourishing scores are more when engaging in this evidence-based practice at least once a month



Giving financially/raising money for specific causes

In an age of increasing isolation, service-learning, volunteering, and focusing on ways in which students can be generous with their time and resources has become vitally important both for individual student flourishing and also for the wider public good. Australian research has shown a steady decline in volunteering rates, with just under a third of the entire Australian population now involved in some form of volunteering.¹³⁸ Other research points to the civic public benefit to communities through providing volunteering services. Volunteering broadens people’s networks and professional skills, and serves as an indicator of personal flourishing, wellbeing, and social cohesion. By volunteering, people can become more outwardly focused, which strengthens social connections and has been shown to reduce loneliness and anxiety.¹³⁹ Other researchers have found volunteering has slightly stronger results than charitable donations for psychological wellbeing,¹⁴⁰ whilst also reporting significantly higher levels of subjective wellbeing and flourishing after volunteering services, in life satisfaction and overall happiness.¹⁴¹

Schools can prioritise service through activities and programs that focus on a culture of service as a core part of their school community and from this base, expand out to a public facing posture in the wider community. Curren et al. (2024) propose that “the flourishing that education should promote must include forms of social contribution and civic cooperation. Education in civic virtues is thus one aspect of the educational facilitation of flourishing”.¹⁴²

Within Christian school communities, research also suggests service-learning and cultivating civic responsibility and social engagement is most effective when it involves clear and explicit links to the school curriculum, student agency, community involvement, and allows for personal reflection activities.¹⁴³ When this is enacted across a school through service-learning, these programs and initiatives have the potential to strengthen relationships amongst students, staff, and the wider community.¹⁴⁴ Developmentally, service-learning has also been shown to increase students' self-efficacy, agency, identity formation and their overall sense of life satisfaction.¹⁴⁵ There are also benefits for local community partners who participate in school initiated service-learning relationships, whereby they can gain access to new perspectives, ideas and valuable human resources to assist in achieving their own mission and vision in local, national, and overseas contexts.¹⁴⁶

Summary

Our findings based upon the longitudinal analyses within this study indicate that service-learning and the teaching of civic and social engagement within Christian schools has a positive and significant impact upon student flourishing. Such impacts are best evidenced when service-learning is part of a whole-of-school culture and not marginalised or compartmentalised as an extracurricular activity, or siloed only within a Christian living or personal development subject or program. Our findings reinforce other studies that found that students participating in service-learning programs demonstrate positive increases in flourishing typically in five outcome areas: attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance.¹⁴⁷

Implications for Schools

- » Be intentional about developing a service culture across the school community rather than undertaking isolated events and activities. Encourage committees of student leaders to provide student voice, service activities and reflection on the whole-of-school approaches to service and social engagement.
- » Plan service-learning and social and civic engagement to be an integrated feature across the secondary school. This may include but is not limited to integration through Christian living classes, camps, chapel programs, extra-curricular clubs and activities, short term mission trips, sporting events, key school community events, as well as integration into subject areas and excursions.
- » Develop a strong network of local, national, and international partners for service-learning projects and experiences.
- » Host panels on topics that are important to the students (e.g. mental health, youth homelessness, poverty, etc.) and provide opportunities to discuss these across the school community.
- » Invite staff from your partner organisations to speak to students on relevant topics regarding their work and how students can respond.
- » Plan whole-of-school community events and fundraising activities that showcase the work of partners and encourage students to be active participants through serving at these key events.



Conclusion

The findings of this groundbreaking project, “*Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools*”, identified the vital and significant rhythms, habits, routines, and practices that Christian schools can cultivate to promote and enhance adolescent flourishing. Whilst recognising the responsibility for the flourishing of secondary students is part of a much wider network of personal, family, church and subject to communal and socio-cultural influences, Christian schools have a significant role to play as person forming eco-systems in promoting the conditions and practices that enable our young people to flourish.

Such a commitment to flourishing necessitates that a vision for holistic flourishing should shape and animate every Christian school. This vision should value every student as *Imago Dei* – image bearers whose personhood is seen as holistic with a commitment to see flourishing in every dimension of a student’s life – intellectually, socially, physically and spiritually. These principles and priorities need to be cultivated within interdependent, relational, and socio-emotional networks and contexts. Furthermore, these contexts for student flourishing require the intentional and active adoption and implementation of evidence-based practices that will nurture, sustain, and facilitate flourishing for our students.

This study has specifically investigated and identified the conditions, contextual factors and practices that promote positive gains in student flourishing within CSA member schools across Australia. The six distinct themes that emerged from the analyses and which have been presented in this report suggest a diverse range of evidence-based practices to improve and promote student flourishing. The themes and the associated practices that were found within this study to significantly improve student flourishing could be conceptualised in the following diagram (see Figure 11.1):

Figure 11.1

Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools:
Conceptual Framework of Themes Arising from The Project



In considering the implications of this framework, and the evidence-based practices that are incorporated into these interrelated and interdependent themes, the following four priorities for Christian Schools are recommended.

Priority 1.

Student flourishing is best cultivated in deeply networked and well-connected school eco-systems

For Christian school communities, the findings outlined in this report provide clear evidence of a plethora of interconnected and interrelated evidence-based practices, priorities and principles that promote student flourishing. For these practices to be effective, sustainable and transformative, the symbiotic webs of these relationships within a student's micro-system (peers, parents, teachers) and meso-system (interactions of social relationships across these contexts) networks, must be actively and intentionally nurtured.

In considering the implementation of these evidence-based practices, it is essential that schools do not inadvertently silo nor compartmentalise student flourishing and wellbeing to a department sub-section or peripheral program within a school curriculum. Rather, Christian schools need to ensure that holistic student flourishing is prioritised as a core purpose across their entire educational program and ensure that the anthropological imperatives regarding what it means to be human find vibrant expression in every aspect of the school's culture and community. In this way, Christian schools can facilitate and sustain communities and cultures that are interdependent and well networked through authentic and well-integrated proximal relationships.

The findings of this report also underscore the critical link between staff flourishing and student flourishing within these dynamic eco-systems. School cultures that prioritise the flourishing and wellbeing of their staff and their local communities, significantly enhance the capacity for student flourishing to also occur. This symbiotic reciprocity between thriving school cultures, thriving school staff, and thriving school students is evidenced in many findings within this report. As VanderWeele and Hinton conclude, schools that are *"well-run, with good leadership, good relationships, a positive school climate, cared-for teachers, and good facilities are far more conducive to student learning and flourishing than schools that are not"*.¹⁴⁸

The findings of this report confirm that flourishing Christian school cultures are a highly effective means of enhancing the capacity for flourishing students. Schools should therefore seek to cultivate the fertile soil of relational, interdependent, healthy, and positive school cultures and eco-systems, within which students can be given every opportunity to thrive and flourish in every dimension of their lives and learning.

Priority 2.

Evidence-based practices matter for student flourishing

Another outcome that has been identified in this report's findings is that evidenced based practices really matter for student flourishing. So much of what is adopted in schools is done on the assumption that "all interventions and practices are equal" without empirical evidence to validate and support these approaches. The specific practices that have been identified within this study provide clear evidence for student flourishing within Christian school contexts that really do make a positive difference for students.

Christian schools can adopt these practices with the assurance that they are evidence based and that the gains in student flourishing identified are not arbitrary or incidental but rather are significant and directly correlated with each specific practice. It is important to note that whilst a number of practices have been identified as increasing flourishing throughout this report, there are a number of other effective practices that were also deemed to have a positive impact upon student flourishing, albeit with lower percentage increases evident. The implementation of the range of practices that were identified in this report should also necessitate that schools seek to measure the efficacy and gains in student flourishing that occur because of their adoption within their own contexts. Through measuring what is valued regarding student flourishing within specific school settings and learning environments, schools

can monitor in objective, longitudinal, and well documented ways the progress and improvement of student flourishing across year levels and cohorts.

The evidence-based practices identified in this report included a diverse array of approaches and strategies that addressed, in varying ways and through differing practices, the holistic flourishing of students. It is therefore recommended that Christian schools seeking to promote student flourishing within their school communities be highly intentional about the selection, implementation, measurement, and review of these evidence-based practices within their specific school contexts.

Priority 3.

Intentional faith formation is an indispensable priority for student flourishing

A further consideration for Christian schools arising from the findings of this report is to recognise that faith formation and spiritual development for adolescents is an indispensable priority for holistic student flourishing in a contemporary age. For a generation shaped by dominant cultural narratives that have sought to eradicate the transcendent and live only within the immanence of materialism and personal pleasure,¹⁴⁹ there appears to be a deep longing for something more in our young people. Increasingly, adolescents are valuing the importance of spirituality and the findings identified within our study suggest that this spirituality is constitutive for flourishing in deeply significant and satisfying ways. Numerous other studies confirm that there is now substantial evidence that personal spirituality and participation in religious communities are strongly associated with overall flourishing.¹⁵⁰ Christian schools and other faith-based communities have the unique opportunity to ensure that faith formation, spirituality and character development are integral and non-negotiable elements of their educational core vision and mission. Formation should be at the very heart of all Christian schools and leaders should carefully consider the types of people their students will become. Accordingly, schools need to articulate a whole-of-school flourishing framework, including evidence-based programs and practices for the flourishing for all students with these purposes and ends in mind.

As the findings in this report highlight, evidence based Christian practices make a significant difference in the lives of young people and positively impact upon their flourishing in meaningful and transformative ways. For some Christian schools, a number of these Christian practices have been marginalised and even eradicated from their programs due to a congested or overtly performative-based curriculum. The findings in this report should challenge, encourage, and inspire school leaders regarding the positive contributions that spirituality, and faith formation can make on the holistic development and overall flourishing of adolescents. It is hoped that the findings in this report would also be the catalyst for schools to be intentional and explicit regarding spirituality, faith formation, and character development frameworks for students and their flourishing at each age and stage of their schooling journey. It is also important to recognise, considering the findings in this report, that formation is not the purview of a chaplain, a Christian studies or character development class, or a specific faculty area. Rather, it must encompass every aspect of a Christian school's culture, staff and community.

Priority 4.

Schools must prioritise a sense of well-belonging for student flourishing

A final outcome for Christian schools to consider arising from the findings in this report reinforces the importance that a deep sense of belonging plays in adolescent flourishing.

The findings confirm the important links between students feeling seen, known, valued, and loved and positive gains in their flourishing. Increasingly, due to a lack of family, societal and interpersonal social cohesion, schools are becoming important "third spaces"¹⁵¹ for both students and families that provide the social glue to bring individuals and communities together. As social isolation and fragmentation continue to increase, it is imperative that schools are deliberate in the curation of welcoming, inviting spaces for all students to belong. The importance of this "well-belonging" for their individual wellbeing and flourishing is supported in many of the findings within this report which support wider research that has identified that individual flourishing can only be sustained in the context of healthy communities

and strong relational networks.¹⁵² Schools are integral to this relational development and must consider how the cultivation of these networks for adolescents within and across the school community can foster an authentic sense of “well-belonging” for every student.

Such initiatives and practices are underpinned by recognising that education is a deeply relational process and that a student’s sense of belonging and subsequent flourishing is most effective when aligned with tightly connected whole-of-school cultures which are embodied within deeply relational networks between students, teachers and parents. Furthermore, cultures that cultivate and celebrate a sense of well-belonging also enhance their own capacity to flourish in significant ways.

The findings in this report also highlight that the importance of belonging and relational connection is foundational to what it means to be human and is foundational to every student’s personhood, identity, development, and ultimate flourishing. It is hoped that these findings motivate Christian schools to embody and enact authentic ways to promote community and relational connections that increase a sense of authentic, welcoming, and hospitable well-belonging within and across their Christian school communities.

Final Word

The findings and key themes identified throughout this report both validate and reinforce why student flourishing is such a critically important priority within the contemporary education discourse more broadly, and more specifically, within Christian schools. It is hoped that the findings outlined in this report stimulate further conversation, reflection and analysis regarding the efficacy, implementation, and evaluation of evidence-based practices that promote and sustain student flourishing in Australian Christian schools. It is also hoped that these findings will provide baseline measures for subsequent deeper analyses and investigation regarding the flourishing of secondary school students within Christian schools in Australia and be expanded to include student flourishing analyses of other schooling models, modes, and sectors.

In light of the findings outlined in this report, we strongly recommend Christian schools carefully consider how they can promote, enhance, and positively increase student flourishing within their contexts and communities through evidence-based practices and approaches. These considerations are not incidental but pivotal to ensuring student flourishing is prioritised and purposeful within each school context and that the holistic development and flourishing of each student – intellectually, socially, physically, and spiritually – are actively promoted and sustained.

Such cultivation requires wherever possible, a close and intentional partnership with parents and families and the fostering of bonding practices that enhance the capacity for student flourishing. It also must take into account formative practices that consider an understanding of how and to what end each student is becoming, and can identify the challenges and opportunities that will increase student flourishing during these secondary years. These relationships form a vibrant eco-system that can promote student flourishing through relational networks for students, staff and the entire school community. Furthermore, a focus on student flourishing will also require that the priorities of engagement in learning are evidenced based, dynamic and student focused. This purposeful commitment to flourishing also necessitates that schools consider the critical role that faith formation, spirituality and service and love of neighbour play in positively impacting student flourishing and overall wellbeing.

We look forward with anticipation and expectation to the transformative impact these practices and priorities may have upon student flourishing and Christian school communities, both now and into the future.



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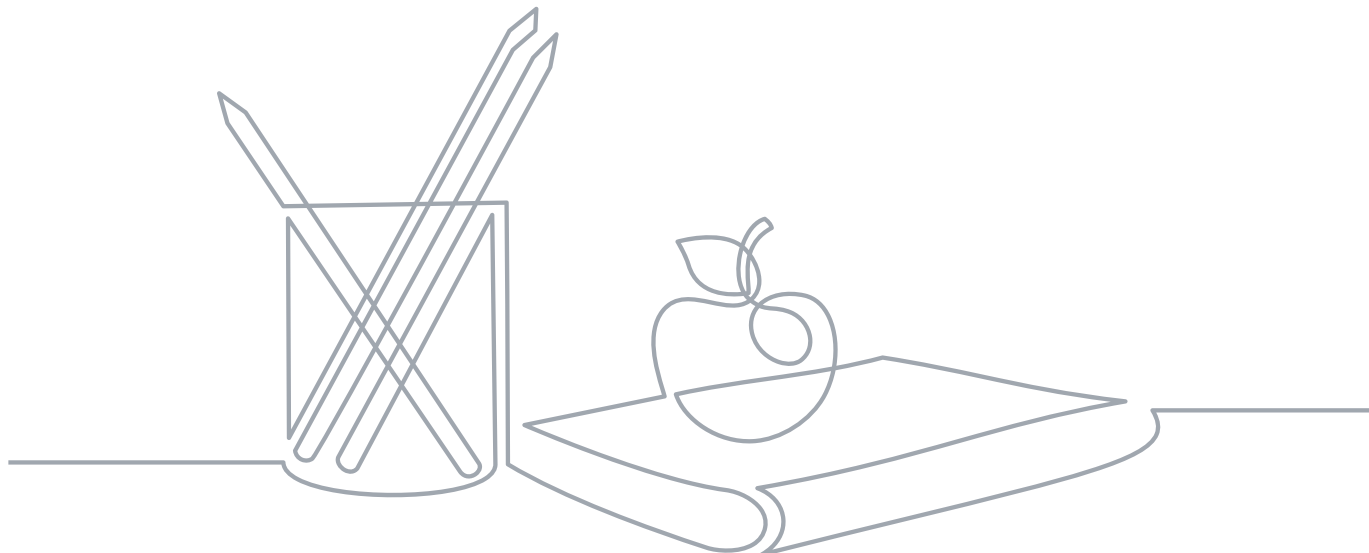
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Executive Summary

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Section One – Introduction: The Concept of Flourishing

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