

## **Research Space**

Online educational resource

**Faith in the Nexus: A sense of belonging**

**Casson, A., Hulbert, S., Pittaway, A., Woolley, M. and Bowie, B.**

# FAITH IN THE NEXUS



## Sense of Belonging

Dr Ann Casson  
Dr Sabina Hulbert  
Dr Mary Woolley  
Prof. Robert Bowie

# How are we sustaining a strong connection between local church and church school?

## **The Faith in the Nexus research project.**

In the Faith in the Nexus research, the term nexus refers to the connections between home, church school and the local church community. Our project investigated the ways church primary schools, working in collaboration with churches and interested key groups, facilitated opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home. It involved 20 church primary schools, a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools. Focus group interviews were held with 187 pupils and 267 adults (parents, staff, local clergy, and other interested key groups) and an online survey was completed by 1002 people; 730 pupils and 272 adults.

## **Key questions raised by the research:**

What do we need in place to ensure a flourishing connection between local church and church school?

How do we address the needs of those who express a sense of 'occasional' belonging to church?

## **Key findings from the research:**

Where a strong, active relationship between church and school was perceived, then there was more evidence of faith-related activities at home.

Flourishing connections between school, home and church nurtures relationships between individuals and these institutions.

Positive relationships between church and school are characterised by invitational worship, celebration of festivals, the presence of the minister in the school, and a sense of belonging and connection to the church community and building.



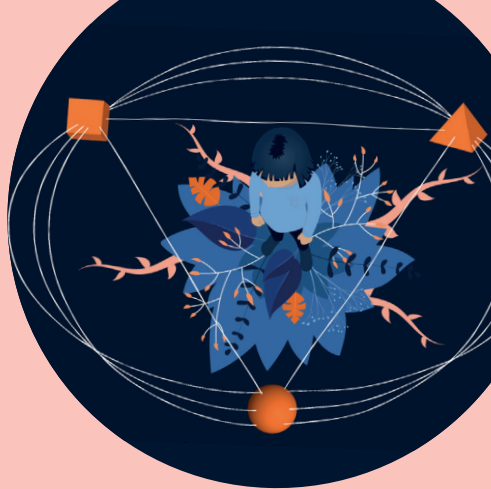
The connection did not always have to be with the local church. In the absence of such a connection, some school leaders established links with other denominations, parachurch organisations or religious orders.

Faith-based admission policy could be seen to influence this sense of connection; it is not surprising that home discussions about faith are more prevalent in homes whose children attend schools with admissions criteria that require evidence of faith affiliation or regular family church attendance.

Many parents and pupils attending such schools do display a fluid and flexible interpretation of Christian identity.

### **What does it mean to belong to church?**

The concept of occasional believers includes many of the church school families, who perceive themselves as belonging through their connection with the school.



### **Watch**

View our animation explainer at [nicer.org.uk](https://nicer.org.uk)

## Conversation Starters.

I know some elderly people that don't have families and they appreciate when they come to church, they see the whole school before them. (Parent)

Within school those who don't necessarily go to church... they would see the church next to the school as their church. (Staff)

Now when you talk to parents and you ask "do you go to church?" They will say [yes] if Open the Book and things like that [are] church. (School)

It is all about relationships. At times of bereavement or crisis... they can see someone they can relate to. Going in over the years pays off... (Minister)

Obviously , the level of interaction I see from [the minister]...it's very rare that you have a day when you don't see him... (Parent)



# A SENSE OF BELONGING

## A sense of belonging to the school

In our research children and parents reported very high levels of connection to their school.

- Parents described the school as being like a family.
- A sense of belonging to the school had a positive impact on asking questions about faith and experience of reflection spaces.
- The sense of belonging to the school encourages relationships where children's spiritual development can flourish.



There may be differences in language and framing of prayer and reflection between schools and between home and school, but pupils' appreciation of this time and expressions of need was common across all schools.

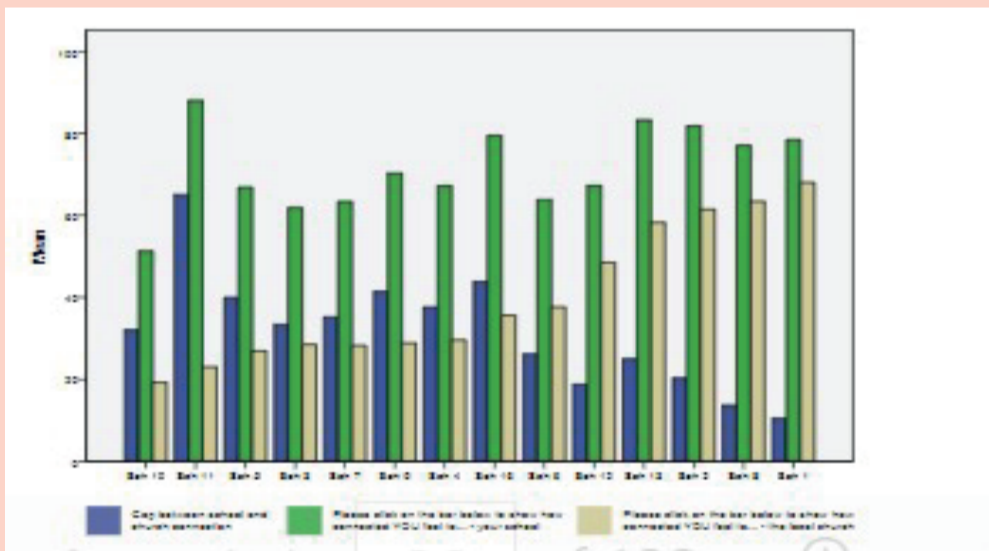
They recognise every little thing... if you come in one day, and you don't feel good... they pick it up and they give you a call and [say] "are you OK?" (Parent)

## A sense of belonging to the school and church.

Our research analysis highlighted that there was much greater variability in the connection to church than connection to school, but there was a perception of a strong connection to the church through the school.

Parents and pupils saw this connection between school and church in the following ways:

- The presence of the minister in school.
- Participation in worship at the church.
- School work displayed within the church.
- Close physical proximity to the church.



The sense of belonging to the school community and the church community relates to the strength of connection between church and primary school, visible in relationships between school leaders and church ministers and engagement with the local faith community.



[The minister is] often in the playground just to talk to the parents and to listen to the parents actually more often than not. (Parent)

I think because [the minister] comes over quite regularly he is a very familiar person who the children know, so when they go over to the church they're very natural there. (Parent)

The children partnered up with an adult from church and they developed and made pictures of the Stations of the Cross. (Staff)

## How do families interpret their sense of belonging to church?

- Belonging in terms of Sunday church attendance does not seem relevant for many families.
- Many parents perceived a sense of belonging to church through school.
- Family engagement in Sacramental programmes of preparation.
- A sense of belonging was engendered for parents, through attending celebrations of the Christian festivals in the local church with school.
- Occasional involvement with the local church gave a sense of belonging.

Our research revealed a wide variety of ways in which people interpreted belonging to church. It was about relationships with people, a sense of being part of a Christian community. It was celebrating important festivals together and a sense of belonging to a place, a building.

## Different ways of belonging

- Participating in community service projects organised by school and local church.
- Attending activities such as Messy Church.
- Attending key church services at Easter and Christmas.



Our research findings showed that a sense of belonging to church was not defined in terms of regular church attendance.

[The school] go over at Easter and Christmas and then it's involving the parents as well. Like we're allowed to come into the church to share that with the church and the children (Parent)

Within school [those] who don't necessarily go [to church]... they would see [the church next to school] as their church (Teacher)

## How do we build and sustain connections between school and church?

Connections need to be strategically prioritised not left to chance. Our evidence highlighted the powerful impact that the positive relationships have on aspects of family faith life is mostly unseen but is apparent in the significance that church school families put on their connection with the local church.

### Making connections

- The presence of the local minister in everyday life of the school.
- Building of relationships between school leaders, staff and members of the local church; people who can bring together school and church.
- Utilising the skills and networks of Foundation Governors, church wardens and members of parish councils, and congregations.
- Sharing information of school and church events and activities in each other's newsletters.
- Shared spaces in church and space in school.
- Affirming the critical role of volunteers running Messy Church, Open the Book, Prayer Spaces and Godly Play in school.

What others would you add to this list?

## What are the obstacles to developing connections between school and church?

- Schools without a local church building or community.
- Lack of connection with the local clergy.

Broken or fragmented connections had significant negative consequences, but our research revealed the innovative methods and the opportunities schools embraced as they encountered obstacles.



There is a need to recognise the importance of connection between church and school and the influence it has on facilitating the exploration of faith in the home.



## Questions for discussion

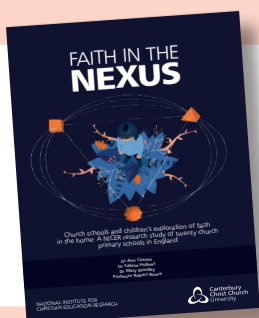
How are strong connections between school and church sustained in your context?

Consider the different ways you can foster relationships across the Nexus.

What opportunities do you offer for families that occasionally belong to the church community?

How is church understood in your context?

What are the challenges you face in sustaining a sense of belonging with school and church?



### FURTHER READING

For the full Faith in the Nexus report: Faith In The Nexus (nicer.org.uk)

Report references:

Connection between church and church school. Pp. 35-48

Relationships. p. 82

Conclusion. pp.84-91