



*Researching relationships in schools  
and supporting practitioners to create  
more relational organisations*



## **CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS CANADA**

### **RELATIONAL SCHOOLS RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

*January 10, 2019*



# Project Summary

Christian Schools Canada has partnered with Relational Schools Foundation from the UK to provide a national research project opportunity for Individual schools associated with the SCSBC, PCCE, and Edvance Christian Schools Association. The research project will provide individualized reports at the school level, association level, and national level. This proposal introduces you to the Relational Schools Foundation and outlines the project proposal in partnership with Christian Schools Canada.

All interested participant schools and associations from across Canada are also invited to attend a meeting with Dr. Rob Loe (either in person or virtually) **on Monday, February 4, 2019 at 10:30 a.m. Eastern time.** The meeting will be at [Calvin Christian School](#) in Hamilton, Ontario.

## Inspiration

### The relationships that shape Christian schooling

Relationships are at the heart of Christian faith and teaching as well as being a powerful and accessible lens for understanding the complex issues of today's society. The story of a Christian's faith from the fall as a rupture of relationship through to its restoration; the relationships of the Trinity; the imperative of love; the church as a relational body; the Hebraic concept of righteousness as 'right relationships'; the relational nature of true 'shalom' – all illustrate how relationships are the essence of faith. Indeed, when Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, he uses the language of relationships: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself." All the law, so we are told, hangs on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

It is God's plan not only to restore our vertical relationship with Him, but also establish horizontal relationships amongst us all. Enmity, disunity, or solitary lives are, one might argue, a rejection of God's purpose for us. And yet, when God commands us to prioritise such relationships, we are reminded, perhaps, that this is not something we can do by ourselves. It might also explain the difficulties we experience in forming and sustaining the relationships around us.

There is often a gap between our thoughts and behaviours. When trying to understand why certain people thrive, the difference between them is rarely explained by an individual's intelligence. Many of us unconsciously accept Descartes' belief that thought is the foundation of identity, that humans are, first and foremost, *res cogitans*, 'thinking things'. Freire called this a 'banking model' of education: that a student's actions are merely one of the many forms of capital we can invest in, and withdraw from, as if actions were always the result of intentional and rational thought. Yet, all of this ignores two very important things:

1. Learning is not primarily an individual cognitive process. The way we learn is mutual and it is deeply social. We know that students who feel connected to school, feel cared for by people at school are happier, healthier and achieve better academic outcomes
2. It also ignores the importance of the contexts and experiences which shape our daily behaviours.

What is so often underplayed is the importance of the cultures that teachers and students experience and daily co-create. These routines, what James K. A. Smith would call liturgies, are formative. These rituals we go through each day shape who we are: our virtues and our values. And our virtues and values are acquired through imitation. They are experienced, negative and positive, in the relationships we invite in schools. As such the development of young people is best understood in the context of healthy relationships. This is, or should be, particularly true of the Christian school experience.

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The issue is that so many pressures conspire to make the forging and keeping of relationships harder than it has been before. A schools' systems, processes and structures, mean that a continuity of relationship between students is often rare. What the Relational Schools Foundation discovered in much of its early work in the UK were schools where, as students get older, they feel their conversation is dysfunctional (they speak often but say nothing). They have little sense of a shared story or narrative. They see each other every day but don't know each other. They do not feel involved (one might say there is a sense of isolation being expressed and not merely individuation). Worst of all, their sense of long-term fraternity is almost non-existent. They do not see themselves working with, or connecting with, the other students in the future.

Many schools have become places of physical proximity without community. They are, in the worst examples, negative and impersonal social forms in which people primarily treat each other as a means to an end and where children don't know each other. But, in the best examples, schools are communities: positive and personal organisations in which people treat others as ends in themselves. More than simply being communities, schools become the very place where we first learn to live in community.

Indeed, the evidence in Ontario and across Canada indicates the need for increasing attention to the well-being of students with particular focus on mental health, a key component of which is relational formation. See, for example, the latest Professional Advisory issued by the Ontario College of Teachers: [Professional Advisory Supporting Students' Mental Health](#).

In Christian Schools Canada, we are convicted that Christian schools can be and ought to be places where students experience healthy relational formation: relationship with God, relationship with others including persons across time and place, and with the universe in its vast and intricate wonder. Relationships within schools are a critical foundation. Thus, we are delighted by the opportunity to work with Dr. Robert Loe and the team at the Relational School Foundation of Cambridge, UK, to more closely examine and understand the relational dimension of Christian schools in Canada.

## The Relational Schools Foundation

### Why Relational Schools exists

Research shows that having a range of close relationships is beneficial to physical and mental health. It tells us that well-connected people live longer and more productive lives than those who are socially isolated; that they are happier at home and at work; that they experience a greater sense of belonging; and that they both participate more in their communities and require less support from social and health services over time.

Better relationships between people - what one might call relational health - also improve individual and group well-being, self-esteem, motivation and social engagement. In turn, these enable people to overcome disadvantage and achieve better outcomes in a range of areas, including academic attainment and educational achievement more broadly.

Relational Schools believe that the right time to start prioritising relational health is in childhood. Indeed, their vision is to improve society by strengthening the quality of relationships between people, starting with children in schools.

## What Relational Schools does

RSFs measures how close people feel to one another in schools, using a model - the **Relational Proximity Framework** - in which relationships comprise a number of domains, and are driven by the quality of interaction in these domains. Thus:

DOMAINS of relationship	DRIVERS of closer relationships	FEATURE of relationship	EXPERIENCE in relationship	OUTCOME for organisation
In the domains of ... Communication Time Knowledge Power Purpose	Greater ... Directness Continuity Multiplexity Parity Commonality	creates ... encounter storyline knowledge fairness alignment	encouraging ... connectedness belonging mutual understanding mutual respect shared identity	and producing ... clarity momentum transparency participation synergy

## Why they work with schools

For young people, experiencing better relationships between those around them, and also between themselves and others, results in better mental health and behaviour, lower rates of absence, bullying and disengagement, and improved progress and attainment. Their hope is that young people who have experienced better relationships in their schools will go on realise the benefits for themselves in later life, but also to improve society more generally through being better able to develop healthy relationships themselves.

Schools themselves benefit as organisations from being more relational in their practice, seeing more engaged and motivated employees, better staff retention, and - critically - the achievement of aims that relate to student progress and achievement.

## What they do with schools

RSF works with schools and other organisations to better understand the impact of current practice on relationships, and to explore how to best drive change so that relationships flourish, and the benefits are realised. They do this through a programme of relational research, using qualitative and quantitative tools to explore how relationships work in schools and other settings, and to measure the relational impact of new and existing approaches to teaching, learning and leadership. For example, we explore:

- the dynamics of student-student relationships, identifying how teachers or schools might seek to improve collaboration, cohesion or tolerance in the classroom or playground
- the extent to which teacher-student relationships enhance or inhibit the achievement of intended aims, highlighting the steps that might be taken to address any issues
- the correlation between relational health and other demographic, economic, academic or health-related variables, so that patterns and trends can be identified and acted on

## What they do with their findings

Relational Schools publishes their findings and shares their research, promoting it to the sector through marketing and public relations activity and other forms of campaigning. Cumulatively, they also build a unique database of relational research, of interest to the academic community, and potentially also

commercial organisations. A project with Christian school associations in Canada is appealing precisely because of the millions of lines of data they already have from schools in other contexts, particularly Christian ones. To invite that international comparison of best practice is important<sup>1</sup>.

### What they seek to achieve

Through the activity listed above, we seek to:

**FORM** new knowledge and generate evidence about the positive impact of more relational schools for young people, their communities, and wider society, thereby promoting an **understanding** of the importance of relational health



**INFORM** and support positive and evidence-based change in the way schools are organised and how they conduct their practice with respect to teaching, learning, leadership and management, thereby **improving** the relational health of everyone in them

**REFORM** the way system-level organisations and authorities conduct their business of policy and regulation, **changing** practice for good by promoting influential evidence and building a 'movement' of relational change-makers.

## Prior work in faith school contexts

In July 2017, Relational Schools began collecting the first survey data from students in Australia. It was the first formal steps of a 14-month project with Christian Schools Australia which would engage with 13,500 participants in the first phase alone, across 5 states. There is much excitement about the final results published in 2018. So successful was the conference, and so well received the findings, CSA schools immediately commissioned a second phase to the research which began in late 2018.

Institutional memories and processes of Christian schools are often implicit. Evidence and deeper understanding of what Christian Schools in Australia do *explicitly* that makes the Christian education experience unique and particularly effective for student flourishing and social/emotional well-being were required. So, CSA as an association began to explore the concept of a Christian school architecture, to define a series of (quite often intangible) core elements of what makes a Christian school relationally healthy.

The work of Relational Schools has been to research and document Christian school best practice and then preserve these in a set of documents, resources and services so it helps those members go back to the foundational elements and re-explore them as they seek to develop schools known for student well-being. They have been able to capture what it looks like, what it feels like and how it is enacted. Each practitioner can then take that research and apply it in their community.

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with Canadian research protocols and ethics the anonymity of schools is maintained and protected at all times. Schools receiving customized reports following their participation will only see the name of their school and no other school will have access to school specific data without the express permission of the school in question.

With our partners, Pearson Publishing, we have designed and built a platform for CSA so they can, long-term, preserve this research, and everything else they have invested in, and collate and curate a broad set of documents, resources and services in one place for members but also the wider communion of Christian schools across other associations and beyond.

*“I think the Relational Schools research is important because it’s almost like measuring the unmeasurable and that’s really exciting. It allows us to start having a conversation.”*

Dr Daniel Pampuch CEO Christian Schools Australia

## Christian Schools Canada Project Outline

### Phase One

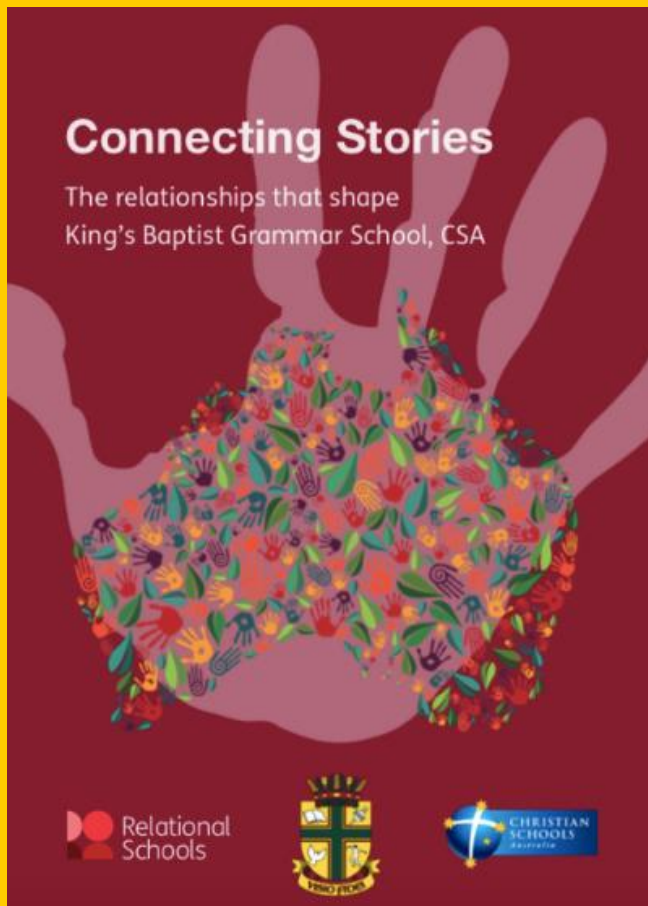
In order to capture the variety of school, community and student contexts, we believe there is a need to measure relationships in at least 7-14 schools in each association. Each school will receive a detailed and customized report outlining the relational trends in both student-student and student-teacher relationships.

Each of the three provincially-specific associations are invited to finance their own meta-reports: Edvance funding the Ontario report, PCCE funding the Alberta/Saskatchewan/Manitoba report, and SCSBC funding the British Columbia report.

In addition, a national study will be completed that would include a meta-analysis of all students and schools that participated in the study from across Canada. The Christian Schools Canada board has already approved and committed to the national study, pending agreement and participation of individual schools.

At the school level the survey costs are broken down (just for demonstration purposes) in the table below. Surveys are administered to any student grades 6 or older, and costs are broken down into a per survey charge \$3.50 CDN which is a standard cost of administering the questionnaires and the analysis and feedback. So, the table represent a variety of elementary, secondary, or K-12 school sizes. Costs are based on total number of students surveyed, regardless of grade.

School	Price/ Survey	No. of surveys/ student	No. of students	Cost of Survey Admin	Data Analysis Cost	Total School's Cost for Customized Report
A. Chr. Elem School (6-8)	\$3.50	2	30	\$210	\$2035	\$2255
B. Chr. High School (9-12)	\$3.50	2	60	\$420	\$2035	\$2455
C. Chr. Elem. School (6-8)	\$3.50	2	90	\$630	\$2035	\$2665
D. Chr. High School (9-12)	\$3.50	2	135	\$945	\$2035	\$2980
E. K-12 Chr. School (6-12)	\$3.50	2	145	\$1015	\$2035	\$3050
F. Chr. Elem. School (6-8)	\$3.50	2	150	\$1050	\$2035	\$3085
G. Chr. High School (9-12)	\$3.50	2	220	\$1540	\$2035	\$3575
H. Chr. High School (9-12)	\$3.50	2	320	\$2240	\$2035	\$4275
I. Chr. High School (9-12)	\$3.50	2	420	\$2940	\$2035	\$4975
J. Chr. High School (9-12)	\$3.50	2	650	\$4550	\$2035	\$6585
K. K-12 Chr. School (6-12)	\$3.50	2	800	\$5600	\$2035	\$7635
L. K-12 Chr. School (6-12)	\$3.50	2	1200	\$8400	\$2035	\$10435



The sample size would be a minimum of 1500 students which would provide around a quarter of a million lines of bespoke data on relationships between students in the schools. The data can also be aggregated at grade level, for example, and say something about male relationships in grade 12 across all the association schools. Powerful correlations would be at the national and international level. The ability to compare to the dataset of Christian schools in Australia and UK is promising.

Relational Schools would propose that the pilot schools in Ontario (and in BC and in the Prairie provinces) nominate a lead researcher. The first step would be to train the research leads in the use of the tools and then to conduct phase one of the study together (that is the team at Relational Schools and the research leads in one of the selected participating schools). The research leads would then be able to conduct the studies at the other 13 (or more) schools in each of the provincial areas. Then final analysis and report writing takes place.

## Phase Two (The Christian Teacher: The Relational Teacher)

***Note: this phase comes with an additional cost. Included here for discussion and planning purposes only.***

Much of what Relational Schools have explored in this area was captured in a film, [The Relational Teacher](#), launched in Cambridge, UK on 17 September 2015.

The film follows Relational Schools and their work with staff at Linton Village College in Cambridgeshire as they assess the impact of their relationships with the students they teach, you see them come to view their agency as professionals through a more developmental lens. The obvious point is that a teacher who understands the relational dynamics of the classroom is able to have a broad and complete understanding of each student as an individual. This in turn enables them to encourage the young people to explore their own agency as member of the group, and their own relationship with the teacher and other staff.

It is clear throughout that this is something that most teachers came into the profession to do anyway, and is self-evidently a good thing! Arguably, the most difficult learning can only ever take place in a secure relationship, so the potential impact of this on children's wellbeing, mental health and academic progress is huge.

### Proposal

Relational Schools would like to work with a handful of teachers from schools across the association (and within all three associations), measuring the relationships between these teachers and their students and

exploring the dynamics of a classroom with a distinctively Christian ethos as demonstrated in various ways across schools. It would be our intention to replicate the pilot project work from the UK, mentoring each of those colleagues who would research, reflect and write about their practice. We could also seek to document their testimonies on film and replicate the publication and documentary we co-created with Linton Village College.

RSF successfully replicated this project with Christian Schools Australia creating a series of vignettes for the three-day conference this August (see screenshot below).



The teachers were not only the key contributors to the film but were invited to the conference to take part in a panel discussion with delegates and explore what it means to be a Christian teacher in today's education climate.

## In the words of former participating schools:

*"Our work with Relational Schools has had a profound impact on my approach as an educational leader. It reinforced the evidence that relationships are the glue that holds every learning institution together and provided a detailed set of metrics to measure this [thereby] providing areas for development. More importantly, it has provided a narrative and direction for system level relational change across our {region} and beyond. Their input and leadership is consistently of high quality, nuanced and evidenced informed which matches where we are moving to as an organisation."*

Anonymous

*"In a sector that talks about evidence-based practice, a lot of the evidence being used is weak, and is used to promote a certain ideology. Relational Schools stood out to us as able to offer an independent, empirical test that what we do works. The process was simple, unobtrusive, and enjoyable, and allowed our staff and students to reflect deeply on the purpose of what we do."*

Anonymous



*"Engaging in research with Relational Schools has been an incredible professional development opportunity for colleagues at [our school]. Being the pilot school for the documentary exploring the impact of teacher-student relationships and contributing chapters to the Relational Teacher publication enabled staff to study this importance aspect of their practice in a deep and thoughtful way. The school community has been able to make tacit knowledge and skills regarding the development of relationships more explicit in staff meetings and training. Building positive 'relationships for learning' has become a more tangible whole school approach as a result of our involvement with Relational Schools."*

Anonymous

*"Relational Schools has really helped us to recognize and promote would-be tacit knowledge. The opportunity to engage with evidence informed practice has really shaped and strengthened our school's culture. We are very proud to be a relational School".*

Headteacher, Linton Village College, England

## Contacts and Project Leads

**Dr. Ed Noot, Executive Director | [ed.noot@scsbc.ca](mailto:ed.noot@scsbc.ca)**

**Dr. Greg Gerber, Director of Learning | [greg.gerber@scsbc.ca](mailto:greg.gerber@scsbc.ca)**

Society of Christian Schools in BC

7600 Glover Rd

Langley, British Columbia V2Y 1Y1

604.888.6366 [www.scsbc.ca](http://www.scsbc.ca)

**Dr. Deani Van Pelt, President | [deani.vanpelt@edvance.ca](mailto:deani.vanpelt@edvance.ca)**

**Justin Cook, Director of Learning | [justin.cook@edvance.ca](mailto:justin.cook@edvance.ca)**

Edvance Christian Schools Association

1295 North Service Road, Suite 304

Burlington, Ontario L7P 3A7

289.203.7171 [www.edvance.ca](http://www.edvance.ca)

**Dr. Robert Loe**

Founder and Director

Relational Schools Foundation, Future Business Centre

King's Hedges Road, Cambridge

CB4 2HY, UK

+44 (0)1223 776122 [www.relationalschools.org](http://www.relationalschools.org)



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