

CHAPTER THREE: FOUNDATIONS, DESIGN, AND PROCEDURE

The introduction and the discussion of the literature in the previous two chapters have established the bias and basis of this research project. This chapter describes the purpose of the research project as a study of influences that are associated with the development of a faith system in children . Adults pass on or want to pass on certain values and beliefs to the younger generation (figure 1). This is part of the process of child nurture . The primary benefit of this research is the evaluation of common 'teaching methods' that are used by adults. This chapter also lists the research's limitations and delimitations (appendix 9,) and details the actual research procedures.

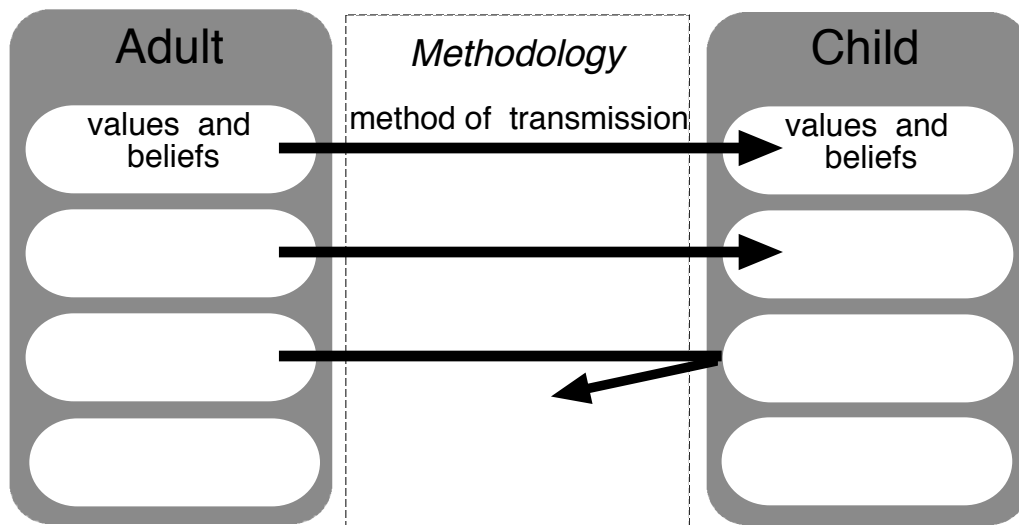


Figure 1

Theoretical Base

Research of faith development is a difficult thing because faith itself can not be seen or manipulated in a physical sense. In researching it we focus on the behaviours and feelings that are the consequence of the beliefs and values. Tracing the changing patterns of behaviours and emotions through time develops a picture of the development of the faith that underlies them. Blijdorp (1995) calls faith a disposition, indicating that it involves both emotions and a kind of knowing or cognition. Faith is a construing of the conditions of existence. It attempts to make sense of our mundane everyday experiences in light of some accounting for the ultimate conditions of existence. Fowler (1986) describes faith development as a sequence of stages by which persons shape their relatedness to a transcendent center or centers of value .

According to Blijdorp (1995) faith nurture emphasizes the nurturer's limitations and dependencies. "She can teach head knowledge but she cannot instill faith; it is a gift of God. Adults are important in the process of faith development but God is the one who turns the heart." The experience of faith, the walk with God in the family must be credible and real, if the child is to adopt it as a his own faith. The convictions of faith also have to permeate everything the adults do, or it will be seen as something separate from real life. The faith of the significant adults in the life of a child must be obvious and joyful.

It has to be understood that a faith is not just a private religious practice that can be kept separate from a person's every day affairs. A person's faith is his moral vision that is part of his whole person. It is not merely a set of moral ideals that can be set aside if the situation requires. Gow (1996) emphasizes that moral ideas are external concepts, objectives towards which one may strive, moral vision indicates involvement and personal experience. Moral ideals can be taught, moral visions are 'caught'.

The process of acquiring moral values has parallels with the teaching of Mathematics. In Math instruction the aim is to develop the students' math 'sense'. This is the awareness that they are dealing with fundamental realities, that Math is a holistic endeavour. While the teacher realizes that basic mathematical theorems and truths are important, he will not present them all to be learned by rote, rather he provides an experience by which the students begin to uncover and discover this reality by themselves.

For people to validate and commit to a certain value they first must have the opportunity to test and experience that value personally. Without that opportunity for testing they will see these principles as 'ponderous rules and abstractions'. Values may be taught as 'obvious fact' but they will have no real meaning for the student because they have no personal connection. Moral values are caught in relationships. It is in relationships that one knows compassion, not merely as a desirable ideal, but as a personal experience. One can therefore connect with it as having reality and intrinsic validity.

A person's faith effects all his endeavours. Consequently, religious training is not a separate section in the whole effort of education, but it is an integral part of the training in all educational subjects. The real purpose of religious training is a life of service in every relationship (Waterink, 1980).

Every adult in the life of a growing young person operates from a personal moral vision. The young person observes them all and chooses to 'buy in to' some of those visions while rejecting others. That process of emulation or diversion is outlined in figure 1. This study considers what it was that those adults may have done that made their faith and vision credible and reliable to the young person. It is the area which I have called methodology. This term needs to be understood in a broad sense including not

only what people do but also what they are.

Design, Method, and Instrumentation

The time available for actual research was about six months. The work started in October 1998 and concluded in March 1999. Cost and time limitations necessitated a local focus to the research. All participants were from the Surrey and Langley area of British Columbia.

While the argument of my research could for the most part be applied to nurture in other religious communities and cultures, I have limited myself to Christian nurture because that is the kind of religious education with which I am most familiar. In order to obtain data that may be considered reliable and insightful, I requested various church leaders to make a subjective selection of people that they considered very committed in the faith. The selection consisted only of young people of post high school age. They were young enough to remember their experiences well and yet mature enough to reflect on them critically. They were in a position to decide for themselves whether to participate in the study. To keep the amount of research manageable within the time available I restricted the number of interviews to seven. Each interview took place in one sitting of about an hour. I interviewed young people of Reformed, Mennonite, Evangelical, and Anglican denominational background.

While it is reasonable to assume that the conclusions drawn in chapter five are applicable to more young people than the seven interviewed alone, it must be understood that circumstances vary for each individual. Some thought needs to be given to the degree of certainty with which the findings are generalized to other people and situations. I have pointed out which findings were supported by the available literature, but even there one must be careful about transferring findings concerning one

group of people to another group of people. This research has relied on categories of people that have certain commonalities. It can not account for all divergencies that may have played a role.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research was a grounded theory study. "It attempts to derive a theory by using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationships of categories of information."(Creswell, 1994, 12)

The topic of this research was not totally new to me. From the summer of 1995 till the end of 1997 I chaired a small committee which researched the role of faith in the lives of young people in the Canadian Reformed Church. My initial interest in a study on this topic was related to the question of whether it is through talk (preaching and teaching) or through experiences and identification with exemplary role models that people accept certain beliefs.

The seven informants who participated in this research project had no prior experience with any study of this kind. They were informed about the intent and procedure of the study by means of a letter (appendix 5) . They understood that they expressed willingness to participate by their own choice, and that they could withdraw from the process at any time (Statement of Informed Consent, appendix 8).

The informants were assured of the confidential use of the data. It was indicated to them that the information they provided would be used only for the purpose of this particular research project (appendix 3 - 8). Transcripts of the interviews were offered upon request. The informants were involved in the validation of the conclusions. They were also promised a copy of the executive summary of the report. A Human Resource Ethics Committee submission was made (appendix 3) and approval was received

before any of the people involved in the process of the research were contacted.

The selection of informants for this research project was not done randomly. The seven informants were recommended by leaders in their respective communities (appendices 4 and 5) based on the faith commitment which they had shown.

Most of the interviews took place in a room in the library at Trinity Western University. One interview was held at the informant's church building. The research instrument was an semi-structured, open-ended interview. Each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed.

I did not ask many detailed questions. Rather, I began with some general and broad questions, then narrowed the focus on the three fields of interest. The idea was that the informants would feel free to tell their own story, to direct it to elements that they considers important. I encouraged the informants to relate their own experiences, opinions, and subjective assessments of personal growth. The collected data deal with what it was that adults did and were like that caused them to have such influence on others.

In response to the replies during the first interviews some of the questions were reformulated to become more specific regarding the focus of the study. The data were reduced to patterns that dealt with the influence on the mind, the heart, and the will of a person. These patterns were interpreted to create themes or 'spheres of influence' in the development of faith. Both the patterns and the themes are represented in diagrams. (Figure 2 and 3 in Chapter 4) Most display a half curve that illustrates a continuum moving toward a climax at the highest stage.

The information was categorized by means of standard procedures. Sentences and phrases in the transcripts were colour coded to indicate similarity of theme or sentiment. Identifying the commonalities was a subjective exercise, largely driven by the

emphases the informants placed in their responses, and by the recurrence of similar descriptive language. Information considerably contrary to the emerging themes was listed in a separate category.

It is important to be confident that the information gathered is indeed accurate and in line with reality (Creswell, 159). Some time after completion of the interviews the informants were provided with a draft copy of preliminary analyses. They were asked to reflect on the accuracy of the categorizations and interpretations.

It would be fairly easy to replicate this study in another setting. It is reasonable to expect that, if the same central assumptions, values and biases of the researcher, and selection procedures of the informants were followed, similar conclusion would be the result.