Christian School Leaders' Perspectives on Identifying and Hiring High-Quality Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Teacher quality is one of the most important factors influencing a student's educational outcomes, yet scant research has examined teacher hiring and quality in Christian schools. In this qualitative work, we thematically analyze interviews about Christian schools' teacher hiring practices with a diverse group of 12 leaders from 10 member schools in the Association of Christian Schools International. We find that these 10 schools generally follow a standard hiring process. The qualifications they seek in teachers could be arranged into a pyramid, where the base—the most fundamental quality—is demonstration of authentic Christian faith. After faith, school leaders desired teachers to demonstrate virtue and to be a good "fit" for their school culture; at the tip of the pyramid is the category of professional and pedagogical skills. While there was some heterogeneity in the top three tiers among school leaders, all agreed on the importance of Christian school teachers having "a heart for Christ and a heart for kids."

Keywords: Christian education, teacher quality, teacher hiring, educational leadership

1.0 Introduction

Religious private schools typically view their mission as distinct from secular private and public schools because they teach academics from the lens of their faith tradition, intentionally providing spiritual formation to students (Djita & Nie, 2023; Sikkink, 2012). While the literature on teacher quality and hiring in secular schools focuses on the importance of the training, experience, knowledge, and skills of teachers, the limited research on teacher quality and hiring in religious schools suggests that to varying degrees, religious school leaders may also strongly consider teachers' faith and their ability to provide spiritual formation when making hiring decisions (Johnson et al., 2023; Sikkink, 2012). This is especially demonstrated in Christian schools, where the majority of both administrators and teachers report that their school community's faith affects personnel decisions (Johnson & Lee, 2023a, 2023b; Lee et al., 2020).

Indirectly, school administrators and others involved in the teacher hiring process may meaningfully affect student outcomes through the quality of the teachers they choose to hire, as research shows that teacher quality is the school-related input that most predicts student success (Chetty et al., 2014; Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Whitehurst et al., 2013). This is not surprising, given that students spend a large portion of their waking hours under the influence of their teachers. In Christian schools, a teacher is an agent not just of academic formation, but of spiritual formation of students as well (Fyock, 2008; Mangahas, 2017; Moore, 2014; Revell, 2008; Sikkink, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand how Christian school leaders conceptualize teacher quality and how this profile of teacher quality shapes their schools' teacher hiring processes.

Using conjoint analysis, Johnson, Lee, and Cheng (2023) studied Christian school administrators' preferences when hiring teachers and found that administrators in the sample

preferred to hire graduates of Christian colleges and universities over secular ones. However administrators were most concerned with the teacher's experience level, highly preferring a teacher to have more extensive experience over limited experience. They also showed particular concern for teachers' academic qualifications and achievements, strongly preferring teachers whose academics were average or above. It is possible that these administrators are primarily concerned with teachers' academic training, experience, knowledge, and skills, even above spiritual quality, but the conjoint experiment only included schooling type (Christian versus secular) as a proxy for spiritual quality. Spiritual quality is difficult to conceptualize and may vary across administrators and school communities. Therefore, qualitative research may be a more appropriate means of initially exploring the interplay between faith and academics in Christian school administrators' conceptualizations of teacher quality and the way these conceptualizations shape their teacher hiring practices.

In the present research, we follow up on the work of Johnson et al. (2023) by interviewing 12 school leaders from 10 schools which are members of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) to inquire into their schools' hiring practices. In the sections that follow, we describe the literature that frames our research, our study methodology, our findings, and the implications of our findings for research and practice.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 What is "teacher quality" in Christian schools?

There is very little research on teacher quality in Christian schools. The broader teacher quality literature, which primarily examines public schools, typically defines "teacher quality" as the ability to improve students' short-term academic and long-term life outcomes such as

college-going, college completion, and adult salary. The academic success of Christian school students can be difficult to study because of the lack of uniform testing practices in Christian schools. One study has examined Christian school teacher quality by looking at teacher characteristics that predicted student advancement in the National Merit Scholarship selection process, and found that teacher graduate degree attainment was a significant predictor (Clagg, 2011). However, thought leadership in Christian education makes it clear that teachers in Christian schools are not just agents of academic formation. As Swaner et al. (2019, p. 7) explain,

> "Christian schools are concerned with academic outcomes, but they are also concerned with the development of the whole student—as one who is made in God's image, created to do His good works…and called to grow as His disciple. This necessitates a focus on holistic learning that includes students' spiritual, ethical, emotional, and physical development, to name but a few. Failure to examine student outcomes in multiple domains would result in failure to capture the fullest picture of flourishing in the Christian school context."

Most Christian school leaders and teachers report that their school community's Christian faith moderately or majorly influences their school's hiring decisions (Johnson et al., 2023a, 2023b; Lee et al., 2020). One study examined teacher characteristics that predict positive student spiritual formation and found these are "exhibiting a Christlike attitude," "creating a classroom climate that promotes spiritual growth," and "being intentional in the spiritual disciplines" (Moore, 2014). These findings suggest that predictors of spiritual teacher quality in Christian schools may not appear on a resume and may even be difficult to ascertain in the hiring process.

Nonetheless, implications for Christian schools may be drawn from the broader teacher quality literature. Research has shown few objectively observable characteristics of teachers to be correlated with positive student outcomes. Collectively, the teacher quality literature has not consistently found a strong positive correlation between students' academic outcomes and teacher certification status or type (Boyd et al., 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012; Clotfelter et al., 2007; Croninger et al., 2007; Goldhaber, 2019; Harris & Sass, 2011; Pelayo & Brewer, 2010; Phillips, 2010; Shuls & Trivitt, 2015a, 2015b), performance on licensure exams like the Educational Testing Service's Praxis exams (Angrist & Guryan, 2008; Boyd et al., 2007; Clotfelter et al., 2006; Shuls & Trivitt, 2015a, 2015b), education degrees (Chingos & Peterson, 2011; Croninger et al., 2007; Harris & Sass, 2011; Rivkin et al., 2005), and graduate degrees (Chingos & Peterson, 2011; Croninger et al., 2007). However, there seems to be some consistently positive findings showing that teachers' abilities to help their students grow academically improve with experience, particularly in the earliest years of teaching (Buddin & Zamarro, 2009; Chingos & Peterson, 2011; Clotfelter et al., 2006; Harris & Sass, 2011; Ladd & Sorenson, 2017; Pelayo & Brewer, 2010). Additionally, there is some evidence that a teacher's content knowledge and academic achievement matter, particularly in the STEM subjects (Boyd et al., 2012; Croninger et al., 2007; Harris & Sass, 2011; Pelayo & Brewer, 2010; Phillips, 2010).

Teacher quality studies often leverage teacher value-added measures (VAM) as a measure of student success, since it is a standardized measure of student growth over time, rather than a measure of students' current achievement, which may reflect their backgrounds and sorting into teachers' classrooms (Koedel et al., 2015). Teacher VAM itself may also be used to identify which teachers are effective, as teacher VAM from previous years strongly predicts student growth in future years (Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004). Higher teacher VAM associated with

better behavioral outcomes, such as lower absence and suspension rates (Jackson, 2018; Kraft, 2019), and better student long-term outcomes, such as higher college-going rates and adult salaries, lower teen pregnancies (Chetty et al., 2014; Hanushek, 2011). However, there is no research on estimating or using VAM in Christian schools, likely because of the lack of consistent standardized testing practices.

2.2 Do Christian school leaders hire good teachers?

Little research has examined teacher hiring in Christian schools. As discussed earlier, only one study—Johnson et al. (2023)—has explored school leaders' preferences in terms of hiring teachers, finding that they strongly prefer extensive experience over limited and strong academics over average; they also showed a moderate preference for Christian postsecondary education over secular.

Teacher demographic data paired with the findings of the broader teacher quality research can allow for some inferences to be made about teacher hiring in Christian schools. According to Johnson and Lee (2023b), of the US-based teachers in the Association of Christian Schools International, 73 percent are female, 85 percent hold teacher certification, 48 percent have a degree in education, and 31 percent have a master's degree, mimicking the characteristics of the public school teacher workforce (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). These similarities might suggest that Christian school administrators do not approach teacher hiring in a drastically different way, relative to public schools. However, while technically, Christian schools may hire teachers as they wish rather than according to state laws, Christian school accrediting agencies such as ACSI often require teachers to have degrees in education or a

certain amount of education coursework and/or to hold a teaching license from the state or the accrediting agency.[1]

The literature on teacher quality in Christian schools does not directly address the question of whether school leaders effectively hire high-quality teachers. However, the broader teacher quality and hiring literature suggests that when given the opportunity, public school administrators, who take contextual factors into consideration, do not hire the most gifted teacher in terms of their ability to help students grow academically (Bruno & Strunk, 2019). Chingos and Peterson (2011) find, in the long run, that it is easier to hire a high-quality teacher than to train a lower-quality teacher to be a better teacher. These findings have implications for Christian schools, suggesting that if school leaders compromise on teachers' professional quality for the sake of contextual factors, they may expend a considerable amount of effort to try to help those teachers improve their practice.

3.0 Methodology

As the largest Protestant Christian school organization in the world, with a global reach, ACSI's membership is largely representative of the universe of Christian schools. We strategically sent recruitment emails[2] to 10 administrators in the United States which we selected anonymously from the sample of administrators that participated in the ACSI administrator survey. Purposive sampling was used to attempt to recruit a sample that represented the diversity of the organization in terms of school size, location in the US, and mission (covenantal versus missional, i.e. admissions policy regarding family faith background) as well as the administrator's sex, years of experience, and race/ethnicity. Of these 10, eight participated in an

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[1] https://www.acsi.org/accreditation-certification/certification-for-teachers/certification
[2] See Appendix A for recruitment email content.

interview. To ensure we reached our target of 10 administrators, we reached out to three more administrators who had a similar profile to the ones who did not respond to our recruitment emails. Of these three, two participated in an interview, for a total of 10 schools and a response rate of 77 percent. Two of the school leaders we interviewed invited a second leader in their school to join the interview because the other administrator was involved in the hiring process in a large capacity. Therefore, we interviewed a total of 12 administrators in 10 schools. Most (eight) of these school leaders' job titles were "head of school," but we also interviewed a school superintendent, school administrator, school principal, and dean of spiritual development. These school leaders' experience in their role ranged from one and a half years to 29 years, and their school enrollments ranged from 117 to 1,000 students (see Table 1).

Table 1

School Leader and School Characteristics

School Leader Study ID	School Division (US)	Covenantal or Missional	School Enrollment (2022-23)	Role Title	Years in Current Role	Sex
1	Central	M	557	Head of School	3	F
2	Central	C	428	Superintendent	3	M
3	Central	C	428	Dean of Spiritual Development	1.5	M
4	Eastern	C	816	Head of School	15	M
5	Western	M	353	Head of School	16	F
6	Eastern	C	326	Principal	3	M
7	Central	C	1000	Head of School	21	M
8	Western	M	566	Superintendent	10	M
9	Western	M	566	Administrator	21	F
10	Eastern	C	117	Head of School	29	F
11	Eastern	M	640	Head of School	6	M
12	Central	C	286	Head of School	7	M

Note: although we attempted to recruit a sample that highlighted the perspectives of ACSI school leaders who identify as racial/ethnic minorities, our final sample was all white, reflecting the underrepresentation of non-white educators in ACSI (see Johnson and Lee, 2023a; Swaner and Ferguson, 2020).

We conducted interviews on the Zoom videoconferencing platform in October and November of 2023, recording both video and audio after the interviewee(s) verbally confirmed their consent to participate in our research study.[3] We transcribed the interviews using Trint transcription software, manually confirming that the transcription was accurate and anonymizing them, and then deleted the recordings. We then used thematic analysis to identify commonalities and differences across the interviews.

In essence, thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that enables researchers to identify, analyze, and document themes or patterns within or across qualitative data with the goal of uncovering meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used thematic analysis approaches because qualitative studies complex and nuanced and thematic analysis is considered the most fundamental approach for providing a rich and detailed yet complex repository of qualitative data (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006; Holloway & Todres, 2003). According to Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87), thematic analysis has at least six phases, as shown in Table 2 below.

We followed each phase of this framework, with two authors each independently conducting the first round of open coding responses from each participant (phases 1-3). These two authors then discussed the codes to form categories and then cluster the themes for the analyses (phase 4). The third author then independently evaluated the other two authors' coding, categorization, and clustering to mitigate bias. Lastly, all the authors collaboratively refined and defined each theme, crafted the narrative that emerges from the themes, and extracted quotes from individuals' responses (phases 5-6).

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[3] See Appendix B for verbal consent language.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis Framework (Braun and Clark, 2006)

Step	Phase	Description
1	Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting initial ideas
2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis; selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

4.0 Findings

4.1 The Teacher-Hiring Process in Christian Schools

The first family of questions we asked school leaders regarded the structure of their

school's teacher hiring practices, what actors are involved in that process, and whether they have

made changes to that process. No two schools followed the exact same process of hiring

teachers, but each included several distinct elements, which align closely with standard hiring

processes in other industries, including public education. These elements were recruitment,

application, interview, background and reference checks, and an offer of employment. Most

school leaders mentioned that they recruit teachers through ACSI's Career Center job posting

board. A few mentioned posting their job openings on online job search platforms such as

Indeed, Handshake, or LinkedIn. Several school leaders advertise job openings on their school's

website and/or social media pages. A few mentioned recruiting teachers at job fairs on college campuses, even traveling to other states to do so. Three of the schools are located near a college, and these school leaders mentioned leveraging this pool of potential teachers. Some mentioned hiring by word of mouth through their school community or from inside the school community, whether from the substitute teacher pool, from among parents of students, or from among individuals who completed preservice teaching requirements in the school (e.g. student teaching).

Where the school leaders' descriptions of their hiring process differed from public schools was the role of faith. Many of the school administrators mentioned that their job application and interview procedure include questions about a prospective teacher's faith background, beliefs, church attendance and involvement, and faith practices, as well as their interest in teaching, their relevant experiences, and their philosophy of education. Additionally, several school leaders mentioned that they ask references about the prospective teacher's faith, relationships, and church involvement. For some school leaders, the process of reference-checking includes speaking with the pastor of the church the teacher candidate attends.

A few school leaders explained that their interview process includes a teaching demonstration. One school leader explained that their school asks prospective teachers to teach two classes during their "interview day" at the school. In between these two live demonstrations, the prospective teacher would receive coaching from the school's instructional coach, and in the second demonstration, the instructional coach observes whether the prospective teacher implements their feedback. The school leader explained that this process is intended to capture the "teachability" of the prospective teacher.

Several school leaders also mentioned that the in-person interview process in their school is not just intended to discern whether a prospective teacher is a good fit for the school, but also to help the prospective teacher gauge whether the school is a good fit for them. Several school leaders mentioned that the interview process includes a school tour, which may include observation of classes. One administrator mentioned that they invite the prospective teacher to a lunch with current teachers, without school leaders present, so that the prospective teacher can ask questions in a low-risk, authentic environment.

One school leader mentioned that upon offering employment to a teacher candidate, they allow the candidate to negotiate salary. Others mentioned that they simply present the compensation and benefit package they offer. Several school leaders mentioned that their teacher hiring process has evolved in recent years, particularly by leveraging technology to streamline the process. Others mentioned that as societal discourse and norms have changed, their school has changed or added questions targeting applicants' views on specific topics, such as gender and sexuality or racial relations. A few school leaders mentioned that they now, post-pandemic, ask questions regarding an applicant's church attendance to ensure they are gathering with a local church.

4.2 The Profile of an Ideal Teacher

The second family of questions we asked school leaders regarded what qualities they value in teachers. While school leaders varied on the specific characteristics they mentioned seeking in a teacher hire, a clear pattern emerged. Each school leader mentioned characteristics of teachers that fall under four broad categories: faith (beliefs and practices specific to the Christian tradition); virtue (traits widely upheld across faith traditions and in secularism as being "good and moral"); "fit" (philosophies of work and education that align with the school's); and

professional skills, knowledge, and experience. Christian schools represented in this sample hire primarily based on the three former qualifications, providing academic and pedagogical training and support to fill in gaps in professional training and experience to allow school leaders to be selective on faith and virtue. As one school leader explained,

> *"We can't change the heart, but we can help them learn how to teach from a biblical worldview." (School Leader #11)*

4.2.1 Faith Characteristics

Every school leader in our sample indicated that an applicant's claim to be a "Christian" or a "follower of Jesus Christ" is a nonnegotiable requirement for consideration to teach in their school, with several labeling this claim as "a testimony of faith in Jesus Christ," "a relationship with Jesus Christ," or something similar. School leaders expressed the position that this qualification is most important because it affects many of a teacher's other traits, and it is necessary for teachers to be able to provide Christian spiritual formation to students. As two school leaders explained,

> *"We're looking for…enthusiastically Christian people. They don't have to have a 20-year relationship of knowing Jesus personally, but we are looking for people that recognize your faith walk is going to be an example to the students that you serve, and we want to cast an enthusiastic picture of what it means to be a Jesus-follower." (School Leader #12)*

> *"In Luke, it tells us that the student will become like their teacher when they're fully formed or equipped, right? And so we want teachers who our students will want to emulate..." (School Leader #5)*

Not only do school leaders care that prospective teachers claim to be a Christian, they also are concerned that they demonstrate sincerity in following Jesus Christ (or, as described in the previous quote, a teacher's "faith walk"). Most school leaders were specific in their explanation of what it means to their school that a person sincerely follows Jesus Christ: a set of beliefs and a set of practices, tested by time. While no school leader explicitly set a threshold of a minimum number of years that someone has been a Christian, several of them expressed that they would not be interested in hiring someone who very recently became a Christian because the authenticity of their faith requires the test of time.

In terms of beliefs, school leaders varied in how they describe what the beliefs of a "true Christian" are, though no two school leaders' explanations were in conflict with one another. A few school leaders referred to the applicants' beliefs as whether they have "a biblical worldview." One school leader explained that it was important for an applicant to be able to "articulate the gospel message." Another school leader mentioned asking the following questions:

> *"How do you get to heaven? What do you think about the Bible? Are there other inspired works? Are there errors? Is Jesus the only way?" (School Leader #3)*

In terms of practices, a common theme throughout the interviews was that school leaders view an applicant's ability to build good relationships as evidence of the existence and health of their relationship with Jesus Christ. One school leader said:

> *"Where the rubber meets the road is building relationships. ...that really comes from references... References will tell me, 'Oh, they were great with the kids. They really*

connected with them.' So I think that's where the iron sharpens iron, [and indicates] they

were solid Christ-followers." (School Leader #10)

A few school leaders summarized the core tenets of teacher quality in Christian schools as a love for Jesus Christ and a love for children:

"We're looking for…do you love kids and do you love Jesus?" (School Leader #6)

"She doesn't have all the lesson planning. She doesn't have all the pedagogy classes, but

she has a heart for Christ and she has a heart for kids. So we'll work with that. So those

are probably two things I won't compromise on." (School Leader #10)

Not only did many of the school leaders express that they value teachers' abilities to form relationships, but also a few mentioned the importance of authenticity and vulnerability in those relationships, particularly as it pertains to the way a teacher "lives out their faith" in their daily life. One school leader explained,

"We think that our atmosphere in our class should be…that our faith is lived out. And so

we've asked them, Are you comfortable in sharing about your faith and how that you're

living that out through your church attendance, to something you're reading, through

music you're listening to... We tell them that spiritual formation just cannot happen in our

Bible classes and in chapel, but it has to happen in every classroom, in every subject."

(School Leader #4)

When asked if they look for specific traits in prospective teachers because they believe those traits to be indicative of ability to provide spiritual formation to students, another school leader explained:

"Someone's vulnerability, their ability to share their failures as well as their successes,

that's a really important thing. I don't want someone to come in here and just tell me their

life's been rosy and they've been perfect all through life and everything is great. That

doesn't show reality, for one thing, and it doesn't show whether or not they're able to

communicate that to the students." (School Leader #9)

One school leader explained that they very rarely prompt applicants to talk about their faith

because they want to know how much the applicant is willing to share without being asked to

share, as well as how frequently it comes up in the applicant's natural conversation style.

A few school leaders expressed interest in an applicant's "spiritual disciplines" such as

reading and studying the Bible, praying, and self-reflection or journaling. Another practice

frequently mentioned was regularly attending a local Christian church. While no school leader

mentioned requiring a teacher to attend a specific church or denomination of churches (even

though a few schools represented are sponsored by local churches), one school leader mentioned

that they do not hire teachers who attend churches within a specific church organization because

of doctrinal differences. A few school leaders mentioned assessing an applicant's church

attendance through self-report questions on the application or in interviews; a few also

mentioned asking the applicant's pastoral reference about the applicant's church attendance.

Several school leaders in our sample also expressed interest in an applicant's involvement and

leadership opportunities in their church, particularly whether they volunteer for children's

ministries or mentor people in the church.

4.2.2 Virtue Characteristics

School leaders also demonstrated that they place value on virtues that are not specific to

the Christian faith. A few school leaders mentioned valuing a teacher's "growth mindset" and

willingness to receive feedback and correction, or that they are "teachable." One school leader

mentioned highly valuing teachers' punctuality, reliability, integrity, and trustworthiness. Another

mentioned seeking "hard workers." A few mentioned that they look for consistency in employment on an applicant's resume because they value a teacher's commitment to persevere in challenging situations. A common theme across the interviews was the value school leaders place upon teachers' ability to communicate and resolve conflict in a healthy way with colleagues, parents, and students. Additionally, a few school leaders expressed interest in teachers who bring "joy" and "fun" to the school and the classroom, demonstrating humility by "not taking themselves too seriously." One school leader explained,

> *"We're looking for people that take their job seriously, but not themselves too seriously in the process, if that makes sense, which fits into our culture because we want to be a great place to work. And I'm looking for people that have humility about them." (School Leader #12)*

4.2.3 School "Fit"

A word frequently mentioned in the 10 interviews was the word "fit"—that the applicant was a "good fit" for the school, and sometimes that the school was a "good fit" for the applicant. A few school leaders specifically used the term "mission fit." We found that school leaders generally used the word "fit" to mean that the applicant's theology and philosophies of work and education were aligned with those of the school.

In terms of philosophy of work, many school leaders explained that they seek to hire people who are willing to be flexible, taking on tasks outside of their job description and being open to switching to a different position in the future. School leaders' philosophies of education varied, but they consistently stressed the importance of a biblical philosophy of education.

Several school leaders mentioned the importance of prospective teachers' view of parents. Two school leaders said,

> *"I would say another key piece for us is around their perspective of parents and the life of their child. [We want them to] view parents as the first educators of their children…we view ourselves as agents of the parents, knowing that they're held accountable before the Lord as they raise up their children..." (School Leader #5)*

> *"What is their attitude towards parents? Do they recognize parents as the primary educators of their children? Do they look at parents as an integral part of the child's whole development and learning process? Or do they look at the parents as more of a nuisance and inconvenience that gets in the way of everything they want to accomplish as a teacher, which I'd say five years ago probably wasn't as big of an issue. But I think increasingly in culture, the view on parents and how involved they should be in education is changing. And we want to make sure we have employees that recognize, hey, parents are the primary educators of their child, and that means including them in as key stakeholders in the educational process." (School Leader #12)*

Another school leader explained that their school is "student-focused," which means that each student is encouraged to learn at their own pace. This school leader explained,

> *"We are not a cookie cutter school. I do not want my teachers to go in there and treat every child the same and walk them through a process. I want them to be willing to understand that the curriculum is a tool. It's not a box that you have to check and something that you fit in. I have had public school teachers come to me and say, 'We have to all be on the same page at the same time all throughout the year with all the other*

kindergarten teachers.' And my response to that is, 'Well, how do you feel about that?'
Because that's not how we roll here. We roll with, how are the kids doing? If your class is
ready to move on, great, [even] if the other class isn't. We have standards that we have to
meet, but we are student centered first. And how they learn and what they learn is more
individualized than in some places." (School Leader #9)

4.2.4 Professional Skills, Knowledge, and Experience

School leaders varied most in terms of what experience and training they prefer prospective teachers to have, but all consistently expressed the idea that being able to teach in a distinctly Christian manner is a nonnegotiable requirement for teachers in their school. One school leader explained,

"We want everything that we do at [School Name]--our curriculum, our pedagogy, our
policies, our procedures, how we interact with our people…whether they be our
employees or our parents or whoever--we want that to be…holy. We want it to be set
aside [for God]. So all of our work, all of all of our classwork, all of our work with our
kids on the field or in the performance hall, we want all of that to be infused with God's
Word and his truth to be undergirding every single thing that we do." (School Leader #7)

However, several school leaders demonstrated willingness to compromise on the degree to which a new hire has *already* gained experience and training in Christian pedagogy. They expressed willingness to take on the task of providing this training to teachers without Christian teaching training or experience, given desirable faith and virtue qualifications, a good "fit," and sufficient evidence of an aptitude or "gift" for teaching. One school leader explained that lack of teaching experience is a non-issue because they offer a "student-teaching" program in which

recent college graduates can gain teaching experience alongside an experienced mentor teacher while being paid as a teacher. That school also offers a mentorship program for mid-career switchers. One school leader explained that they themselves had a background in a non-educational career field and entered education mid-life, and this experience gave them a passion for recruiting people without educational training and experience into the Christian education field. Others mentioned offering summer trainings for new teachers and ongoing professional development to continue to develop teachers' distinctly Christian pedagogy.

In terms of candidates holding educational degrees, school leaders' dispositions ranged from indifference toward to a strong preference for a degree in education. A few school leaders who strongly preferred a teacher to have an education degree expressed more willingness to consider an applicant with a degree in their content area if applying for a secondary school position, compared to an elementary one. Additionally, school leaders' dispositions ranged from indifference toward to a strong preference for a teacher being a graduate of a Christian postsecondary institution. For example, the following school leaders expressed the value they place on Christian higher education:

> *"I'd say if they had a Christian school experience or have attended a Christian college, I think that would make them more interesting, because they would have some familiarity with the [Christian education] community." (School Leader #1)*

> *"[If] you had the experience in a public school and you went to a Christian university, and you have years of teaching experience, that would put you at…a higher level of interest for us in pursuing [you]." (School Leader #6)*

However, one school administrator expressed no preference for Christian higher education, explaining,

"A biblical worldview is not just a given if they graduated from a…Christian higher [education] institution." (School Leader #10)

Several school leaders mentioned that an applicant having attended a K-12 Christian school was a positive trait for a candidate, as it may have shaped their view of education in a way that is aligned with their teaching in a Christian school. One school leader mentioned that they viewed work experience in a Christian summer camp as an indicator of likely aptitude for distinctly Christian teaching.

4.3 Proceeding When No Ideal Candidate is Available

While school leaders varied in what practical steps they take when they cannot find an ideal candidate to hire, they all expressed that they were unwilling to hire a teacher who did not meet their faith qualifications. For example, one school leader said,

"She doesn't have all the lesson planning. She doesn't have all the pedagogy classes, but she has a heart for Christ and she has a heart for kids. So we'll work with that. So those are probably two things I won't compromise on." (School Leader #10)

The following are some of the ways school leaders described proceeding when they cannot find an ideal teacher candidate: hiring a long-term substitute; shuffling responsibilities around among current staff (one mentioned asking teachers to give up planning in exchange for more pay, while another mentioned their administrative assistant stepping in to teach); and offering the person leaving the position vacant a part-time position, then shuffling the remaining responsibilities around among existing staff.

A few school leaders mentioned the role of faith and prayer in hiring teachers:

"I pray every year…[that we] have all of our teachers in place before August so that we can get them all trained and ready to go through the school year, but [God] has never, ever once failed us. And that's the testimony that I have for our school. I never have to worry that God is not going to provide." (School Leader #9)

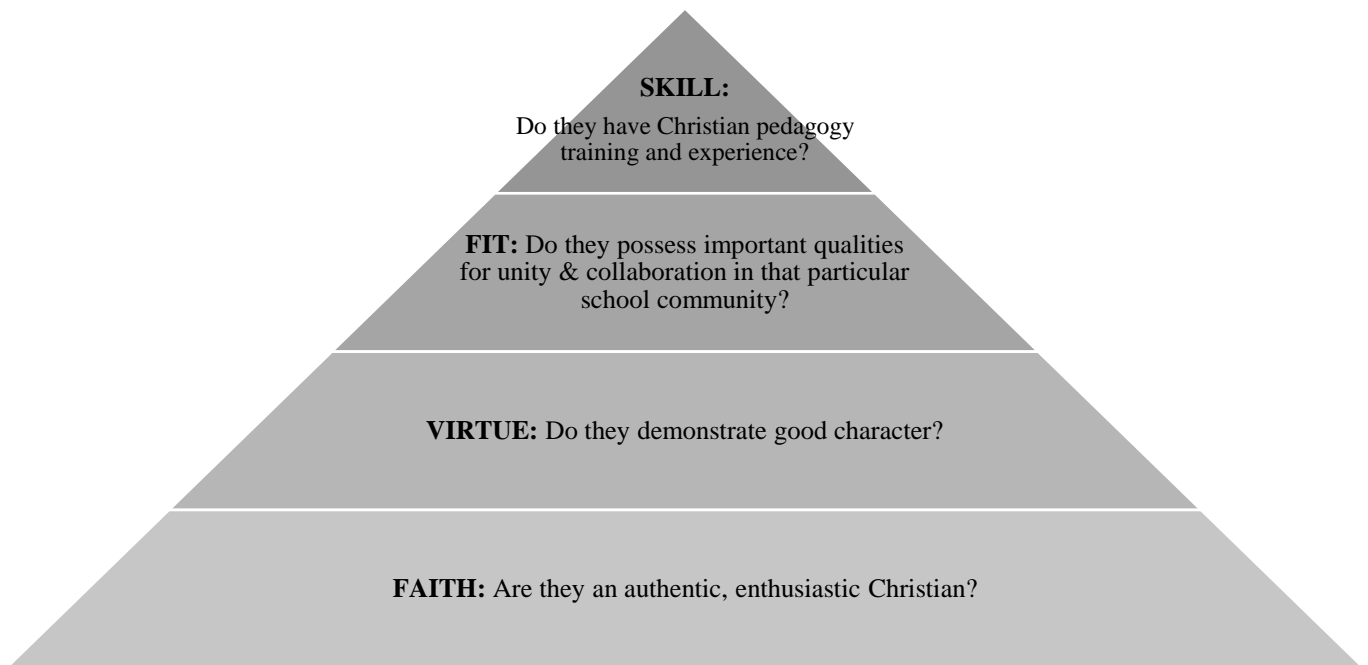*"We pray a lot. We're willing to wait. And we watch the Lord provide for the needs of the school…" (School Leader #5)*

"…part of God's goodness to our institution…is He's always filled the roles for us. It's not like a magical HR strategy. He puts the right people in front of us for the right time, and He's been so good to us and who he's brought to our school." (School Leader #12)

5.0 Discussion

The 12 school leaders in our sample, representing a diverse sample of 10 ACSI member schools, shared information about the way their schools hire teachers and described the qualities they seek in a prospective teacher. Conceptually, these can be arranged into a pyramid (see Figure 1), where the base of the pyramid is school leaders' first priority: whether a prospective teacher is a person of authentic, "lived-out" faith in Jesus Christ. Secondly, school leaders desire for teachers to demonstrate virtues that may be found in non-Christian individuals, but are also considered marks of faith in Jesus Christ, such as being a person of diligence, integrity, humility, teachability, and punctuality. With confidence about these attributes, a school leader goes on to explore whether the prospective teacher is a "good fit" for the school—whether their philosophies of work and education align with the school's, promoting unity and healthy collaboration.

Figure 1

Christian School Teacher Selection Priorities

SKILL:
Do they have Christian pedagogy
training and experience?

FIT: Do they possess important qualities
for unity & collaboration in that particular
school community?

VIRTUE: Do they demonstrate good character?

FAITH: Are they an authentic, enthusiastic Christian?

Note: figure created using Microsoft Word.

While still important, school leaders generally view prospective teachers' professional skills as a less strict requirement. Their dispositions toward teaching experience and training ranged from indifference to a strong preference. School leaders expressed the importance of a teacher being able to teach in a distinctly Christian manner, but felt there were different avenues to get to that destination, including the school providing training and support post-hiring. One school in particular offered a student-teaching program for new teachers with little or no experience. More research should examine whether Christian schools effectively train novice teachers, particularly because research suggests that hiring high-quality teachers pays off in the long run, compared to hiring lower-quality teachers and taking on the task of helping them improve (Chingos and Peterson, 2011).

While the Johnson et al. (2023) conjoint experiment suggested that experience and academic qualifications are very important to school leaders, perhaps even more than spiritual qualifications (under the assumption that being the product of Christian education could be a proxy for spiritual quality), the present study finds that spiritual quality is the foremost consideration in these school leaders' teacher hiring processes. However, the present findings do not contradict the conjoint experiment findings, but rather help to *explain* them: several school leaders in our sample expressed indifference about being a product of Christian education because many felt it is not a good proxy for spiritual quality. Compared to being a product of Christian education, all school leaders expressed more interest in a prospective teacher's self-reported spiritual experiences, beliefs, and practices, and some in what their references (especially pastoral) had to say about their life, church involvement, and relationships. Furthermore, most school leaders explicitly said they were more likely to compromise on experience and training, but never on spiritual quality.

Interestingly, school leaders differed in the value they place upon teachers' Christian higher education experiences. Djita and Nie (2023) found that school leaders, teachers, and parents in Indonesian Christian schools who attended a Christian university were more likely than those who attended a secular university to emphasize spiritual development of students as the foremost goal of Christian schools. While it is not clear whether these results generalize to the US context, replicating this research in the US could shed light on whether the indifference of some US Christian school leaders toward the postsecondary institutions of their teachers could be working against their goals to spiritually develop students. Lee et al. (2023) found that among an international sample of Christian school alumni, those who attended a Christian institution of higher education were significantly more likely to feel supported or strengthened in their faith.

On the other hand, Johnson and Lee (2023) found that among teachers who ever attended a Christian postsecondary institution, about 65 percent reported their most significant source of spiritual formation during their undergraduate years to be their church, their friends and mentors, or their personal study, rather than on-campus ministries or activities. The role of Christian higher education in preparing teachers to spiritually form their students should be further explored.

The present study has a few limitations. First, the sample only includes US-based school leaders; these findings may not generalize to the international Christian school sector. Second, despite our attempts to include school leaders who identify with a non-white race or ethnicity, our sample only includes white school leaders, reflecting the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within ACSI and the Christian school sector at large (Magneti, 2019). School leaders of other racial or ethnic demographics may present somewhat different values when it comes to Christian school teacher quality because of the ways their experiences differ from white, US-based school leaders. Future research should examine the how Christian school leaders of other backgrounds and/or who are located outside of the US express preferences in hiring teachers.

Because of the important influence of teachers upon students, examining teacher quality in overlooked corners of education is a vital task. Overall, the present study helps to add to our understanding of teacher hiring practices in Christian schools and next steps for investigation and research, and will hopefully contribute toward the improvement of teacher hiring practices in Christian schools as school leaders seek good teachers who "have a heart for Christ and a heart for kids."

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Appendix A: Initial Email for Participant Recruitment

Subject Line: Interview Request

Dear ACSI School Leader,

We here at ACSI appreciate your participation in the pilot of the Flourishing School Culture Instrument in the fall of 2022.

We, along with researchers from the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, are conducting a study on teacher hiring in ACSI schools to follow up on the FSCI survey. We are interested in hearing from you to learn more about your school's hiring process, how you as a school leader conceptualize teacher quality in Christian schools, what you look for in applicants, your role in the hiring process, and how you make hiring decisions under suboptimal circumstances. Your participation will help us better understand the Christian school teacher pipeline and school leadership practices.

We are requesting up to 30 minutes of your time for an interview (recorded with video and audio on Zoom). These recordings will be stored on a secure University of Arkansas server, your responses will be kept anonymous, and the recordings will be deleted after they are transcribed. This study has been approved by both ACSI and the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB protocol no.: 2309491363).

If you are willing to share your time and insights with us, please reply to this email so that we can schedule your interview. Please let us know if you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration and for your leadership in Christian schools.

Sincerely,

[names and contact information blinded]

Appendix B: Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Instructions: ask numbered questions first; ask lettered questions as follow-up questions if the interviewee has not already offered that information.

1) What does the process of hiring a teacher look like in your school?
   a) Who is typically involved and what is your role in the process?
   b) How long does the process usually take from the moment a candidate submits an application until they accept your offer of employment or receive your notification that they have not been selected?
   c) In your time at the school, has this process changed?
2) What characteristics of applicants do you look for during the screening process, and why are these important?
   a) What characteristics of applicants do you believe make them qualified to provide spiritual formation to students, and why? What indicators of these characteristics do you look for in the screening process?
   b) What characteristics are you looking for specifically on a resume, and why?
   c) What characteristics are you looking for specifically in an interview, and why? What kind of questions do you ask in interviews to draw information about these characteristics out of applicants?
   d) What characteristics are less important to you, and why?
   e) How do you involve references, and what do you ask them?
3) If none of the applicants for a teaching position align with what you are looking for in a teacher, how do you proceed?
   a) Are there any teacher characteristics you are willing to compromise upon when presented with a slate of "non-ideal" candidates? If so, what are they, and why?

Appendix C: Consent to Participate in Research

Instructions: prior to the interview, email the language below to the interviewee. In the interview, prior to beginning recording, read the following agreement to the interviewee at the start of the interview to confirm their consent.

The Association of Christian Schools International and researchers from the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform wish to conduct this study to better understand the ways that ACSI member school leaders hire teachers. You will be recorded on video/audio; the recordings will be stored on a secure University of Arkansas server, transcribed, and anonymized, and the recordings will then be deleted. We will ask you a series of questions regarding how you and anyone else involved in hiring teachers in your school hire teachers. You can decline to answer a question if you prefer. Your responses, along with the responses of other administrators we interview, will be aggregated in our report. No identifying information will be included. If you have questions or concerns about this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact [names and contact information blinded; includes university IRB Compliance Coordinator]. We have already emailed you a copy of this consent agreement; please keep it for your records. Do you consent to participate in this study?