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"School Parenting": Missional implications for campus mentorship in Senior High Schools in the Kumasi Metropolis of Ghana

Daniel Awuah-Gyawu
Department of Practical Theology and Missiology
Faculty of Theology
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
awuahgyawud@yahoo.co.uk
ORCID: 0009-0005-9352-4405

Peter White
Department of Practical Theology and Missiology
Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University
pwhite@sun.ac.za
ORCID: 0000-0002-8177-140X

Abstract

Mentoring is generally understood as having a positive impact on people and society. The informal system of youth mentoring among Senior High School students in Ghana is referred to in this essay as "school parenting". This exploratory study uses Kram's (1983:613–622) model of mentoring to investigate "school parenting," which is discussed based on the following findings: (a) students' experience of "school parenting" in light of Kram's mentoring model; (b) faith and nurturing; (c) exposure to risky behaviours; (d) compassion needs; and (e) approach to social justice. The article contextualizes mentorship in campus settings and examines it from a missional perspective.

Keywords

Missional; mentoring; school parenting; campus mentorship

Introduction

In Senior High School (SHS) in Ghana, there are certain practices in the context of a type of peer mentoring relationship that assumes varying forms. This type of mentoring is referred to in this article as "school parenting." In this phenomenon, senior students serve as parents to junior/new ones – providing support, protection and guidance, and influencing their faith and moral formation as well as social integration. Although this practice is not formally recognized by the Ghana Education Service (GES), teachers and administrators are aware of its existence.

"School parenting," in its positive sense, mimics the parent-child relationship depicted by God. Metaphorically, God is presented in the Bible as a parent (DesCamp & Sweetser, 2005:213; Meier & Fetterman, 2022:43). This portrait depicts who he is as a relational being and what he does with humankind (Spencer, 1996:435; Henriks, 2007:1003). Although the examples of Paul and Timothy as well as Elijah and Elisha, are usually presented in the context of mentorship, they also portray this "parent-child" relationship that impacts "children" in many ways. This concept needs to be properly relayed to the youth.

To appropriately assist the youth in developing a proper understanding of the God-man relationship as well as an appreciation of the value and meaning of life, Root (2007:10) and Aziz (2019:3) propose the incorporation of "empirical research", and theological reflection in understanding youth ministry.

While existing literature on youth and peer mentorship emphasises social science perspectives (Bordin 1979:253; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper 2002:159; Allen & Eby (eds.) 2007:32; Eby, Rhodes, & Tammy in Allen & Eby (eds.) 2007:7), there is a notable research gap regarding the "school parenting" model and praxis in SHS in Ghana. Specifically, missional impact and potentially negative consequences for exposed students remain unexplored.

This contextual study fills the gaps in the literature by exploring the phenomenon through Kram's (1983:613–622) conceptual mentoring model and its missional implications. This article originates from a section of a bigger project in which the researchers inquired into the nature,

characteristics, and challenges of SHS students in the Kumasi Metropolis of Ghana.

The article was approached from an interdisciplinary perspective (missiology and education) since one of the authors is a professional teacher and an educational administrator. Given this, the study employs concepts from missiology and education to address the identified research gap that drives the study. For clarity, students in SHSs in Ghana are mainly adolescents between 15 and 19 years old. This stage marks the beginning of a gradual process of independence from parents and preparation for young adult life at the tertiary level. However, at the time of the interviews, all the respondents were over eighteen years old.

The following sections discuss the research methodology, Kram's mentoring model, and the research findings. The purpose of discussing Kram's mentoring model is to establish the theoretical foundation for the "school parenting" praxis. It would later be used as one of the key concepts for the research findings on "school parenting" and its missiological implications.

1. Methodology

The study is qualitative and addresses "school parenting" as a phenomenon whose existence is commonly known and does not need statistical evidence to prove. The study does not seek to compare the various expressions of "school parenting" models in Ghanaian missionary and non-missionary SHSs. However, since three of the five SHSs studied have missionary backgrounds, some of the ideas expressed by the respondents reflect missionary and non-missionary models of "school parenting".

The study covers five SHSs in the Kumasi metropolis in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. This comprises two all-boys schools, two all-girls schools, and one mixed-sex school. Participants were purposively sampled for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon because of their experience of this mentoring model, willingness, accessibility, and ability to make meaning of it (Creswell & Poth, 2018:218). They are former students who experienced this practice in their respective schools during their SHS education and in their campus lives have been involved in youth and/or campus ministry.

The years of completion of respondents were from 2004 to 2021. The respondents were four (4) Christians and a Muslim. The names of the respondents and their schools were pseudonymised as follows: Adwoa of Calvary School, Akwasi of Eden School, Akosua of Bethel School, Kwadwo of Zion School, and Kwaku of Goshen School. The schools and the participants were pseudonymised because participants agreed to participate on that condition. This was adhered to because, although the phenomenon exposes some good practices, it also presents some bad ones that can give bad branding to participants' schools.

In-depth personal interviews were conducted in January and February 2023 to elicit participants' observations about the practice and their personal experiences. The interviews leveraged their previous exposure to the practice in their respective schools. We also drew on the researchers' personal SHS experiences in the study area, aligning with Bryman's (2012:21) view that personal experience can stimulate research. The findings that were generated from the transcribed interviews were analysed thematically. The following themes were derived from the empirical data collected for the study: (a) students' experience of "school parenting" in light of Kram's mentoring model; (b) faith and nurturing; (c) exposure to risky behaviours; (d) compassion needs; and (e) approach to social justice. To link the research findings to the key theoretical framework of the study, we start with discussions on Kram's mentoring model.

2. Kram's mentoring model

The phenomenon of mentoring lacks a common definition. This is due to varying degrees of emotional energy expensed in the relationship, the age difference between the people involved, the duration of the relationship, and the nature of support provided by the more experienced ones (Allen & Eby (eds.) 2007:10). The term "mentoring" is derived from "Mentor", the learned and wise friend of the Greek king Odysseus who was asked to take care of Telemachus (Odysseus' son) in a nurturing situation (Vierstraete, 2005:381). A mentor is thus a person entrusted with a position of responsibility and trust and refers, in this article, to a more experienced youth entrusted to discharge this role in the absence of biological parents (Vierstraete, 2005; Allen & Eby, 2007:25). Mentoring in schools

is a programme that revolves around goal alignment, task assignment or task sequence, and relationship building; and is anticipated to enhance self-efficacy, reduce involvement in unhealthy habits, increase academic output, and ultimately reduce the chances of dropping out of school (Allen & Eby (eds.), 2007:32; cf. Bordin, 1979:253; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002:159; Eby, Rhodes, & Tammy In Allen & Eby (eds.) 2007:7). In this study, mentoring is understood as a close relationship between a more experienced student and a less experienced one with the primary intention of exploiting the potential to improve the experience, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviour, of the protégé (Kram, 1983:613; Austin, 2002:104). Mentoring in this context includes functions such as academic, social, financial, and emotional support by the mentor during the time of their relationship, although senior students sometimes benefit from their mentees.

Kram's model of mentorship has four main stages. These are the initiation, cultivation, separation, and then redefinition stages (1983:613). At the initiation stage, there are avenues for working around the same task and getting along with each other. This may extend to modelling expected standards of performance, acceptance of each other, friendship, and counselling (Kram 1983:616). Kram's second phase of her mentoring model is the phase of frequent meeting times, the senior's description of their experience, the junior's identification of their weakness and need for support, mutual benefit, and emotional attachment (Kram 1983:616–617). At this point, there is behavioural modification arising from the frequent sharing of experiences during mentor-mentee interactions (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993:561–573; Allen & Eby, 2007:32; De Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013; Eshchar & Fragaszy, 2015:1). Thirdly, Kram identifies a stage that is marked by an expression of improved output based on the initially set targets as well as a feeling of self-reliance. This is a result of the cognitive and affective interactions of both the mentor and the mentee. It is the attainment of this level of mastery that serves as the bedrock of separation. Kram's (1983:620–621) redefinition phase – the last of four – highlights a mentoring relationship that turns into an informal friendship sustained by mutual support, which is reminiscent of what began the relationship.

The above four stages of Kram's (1983) mentoring model will be discussed later under the subheading, 'Student's experience of "school parenting" in light of Kram's mentoring model'. This discussion forms part of the research

findings. It would therefore serve as the foundation for the missiological implications of the research findings.

In the following section, we discuss the methodology used in the study.

3. Research findings and discussions

This section begins by addressing the dynamics between Kram's mentoring model and what obtains in some SHSs in Kumasi in the context of "school parenting". These are discussed in the context of mentorship in this section.

3.1 Student's experience of "school parenting" in light of Kram's mentoring model

In "school parenting," the pairing of mentors with mentees takes diverse approaches. The initiation for paring, as seen in Kram's model, emanates from parents or guardians, new students, or senior students. In some cases, as practiced in Calvary School, it is initiated by housemistresses (Adwoa, 2023). Also, Akwasi noted that "the pairing is initiated on the first day of reporting or in a later visit to the school, when parents request prefects and religious denomination members to take special care of their wards" (Akwasi, 2023). This approach to initiating mentoring practice is reflective of the historic Homeric type, in which Odysseus left his son in Mentor's care (Vierstraete, 2005:381).

Alternatively, new students can request that seniors from their previous schools, churches, or local communities act as "school parents." As they become more acquainted with the new environment, they may seek additional seniors based on perceived needs. Likewise, seniors actively seek out new students to mentor, particularly those perceived to be under negative peer or senior influence.

In a latter scenario, where the initiation of this mentoring model can be an imposition, Akosua mentioned that "house prefects pair new students to final years based on the list of students allotted to their houses even before the arrival of the new students. And with the support of the house mistresses, all students are supposed to comply" (Akosua, 2023). In all the schools studied, seniors can have two or more "school children", depending on the number of new students in a cohort as well as the interests of juniors and

seniors in particular students. Similarly, juniors may also have more than one mentor. In co-educational SHSs, the "school parenting" relationship is extended. "If two seniors of the opposite sex are friends, automatically, their "children" (of the opposite sex) become siblings" (Kwadwo, 2023). The extent of acceptance of each other in this sibling relationship depends on the levels of commitment and the additional observations made about each other. Since "school parenting" is an accepted phenomenon in many of the SHSs in Ghana, in this study, there was no evidence of a student refusing to have a school parent. However, new students may opt out based on personal differences during the initiation stage.

The physical closeness of both the mentor and the mentee fosters the cultivation (the second stage of Kram's model) of the mentoring relationship. It takes place between students in the same house of residence and mostly in the same dormitory. The dormitory beds are mostly two-tier, and, in most cases, the senior occupies the first tier of the mountable bed, whereas the new student takes the second tier. Additionally, some seniors keep copies of the keys to juniors' (mentees') boxes and sometimes access them. This proximity fosters bonding but comes with a loss of privacy for both "parents" and "children." Akosua recalled the case of "a new student who had the medical condition of bedwetting, which affected her self-esteem and which she preferred to keep to herself. The loss of privacy compelled her to share her private life with her school mother." According to Akosua, "the new student was given the needed support to boost her self-esteem" (Akosua, 2023).

Besides the dormitory contact, students in this mentoring relationship usually move together, attend school gatherings, study, and participate in co-curricular activities. At this stage, both students in the mentoring relationships are susceptible to behavioural modifications.

The third stage of Kram's model is separation, which in the context of "school parenting" may be initiated by either the mentor or mentee when (a) any of them observes behaviours that they feel are not helpful; (b) the junior becomes familiar with the new environment and feels they can be independent; (c) the senior completes the school. If the process of separation is initiated by the new student, the person can request the house prefect to change his or her sleeping position to keep a distance from his or her

"school mother" or "school father." Akosua shared her personal experience when she recalled, "Initially I felt loved but later I decided to ignore my mother because she wasn't who I expected she was" (Akosua, 2023).

The redefinition stage of the "school parenting" relationship occurs when they become friends after they both complete school. The majority of respondents reported that they have maintained communication with their "school parents," and are connected as friends on various social media platforms. Occasionally, they reminisce about school events with amusement and nostalgia.

In the discussions above, we have situated "school parenting" in Kram's (1983) mentoring model. The following are missional implications for the practice.

3.2 Faith and nurturing

The Ghana Education Service (GES) permits students on campus to practice their religious beliefs (GES, 2024:13). Consequently, educational authorities are generally sympathetic to faith practices and expression, and students do so in forms such as the verbalization of their beliefs, joining in the celebration of religious festivals, and the use of religious objects in the school. Students are also permitted to join religious groups of their choice. Their involvement in occultism – "Consulting mediums, soothsayers, casting spells, engaging in the trial by ordeal, or any other occultic practice" – is however forbidden and punishable according to the GES's "code of conduct" for students (GES, 2024:13; cf. YAGSHS, 2016).

This kind of context, together with the nature of bonding between students exposed to "school parenting" has implications for the faith formation of juniors. Studies show that faith development among students on campus is affected by the availability of nurturing opportunities (Cloete, 2012:74), personal conversations among them (Bryant, 2005:2), and the number of religious programmes that are held there (Beliak, 1989:48). This was partly demonstrated in the results of this study. For instance, Kwadwo identified four possible situations that junior students may face: (a) an influence to belong to a denomination different from or same as one's home denomination (b) disaffiliation from faith-based campus groups (c) a mentorship leading to the disdain of school-organized religious

programmes (d) a change in faith from one religion to the other (Kwadwo, 2023).

Akwasi's experience corroborates Kwadwo's observation. He was a house prefect and the president of a Christian denomination in the school. Akwasi (2023) reported his role in the faith formation of his "school children" in the following manner: "I positively influenced the faith-building of my mentees by attending denominational meetings with some of them and encouraging the rest to actively participate in their respective denominational activities."

According to Akwasi, he organized his mentees to observe their quiet time[1] and pray together on the school field three times a week. Besides, he guided them to choose good friends (Akwasi, 2023). He also taught them what he knew from the Bible.

Kwaku, the Muslim participant reported that, "I mostly encouraged my 'school son', who was from a Christian home, to attend Christian church services. I also demonstrated to him how to be committed to religious activities" (Kwaku, 2023).

Discussions above show how the religiosity of "school parents" can affect new students. Addressing the negative impact of "school parenting" on juniors' faith, Kwadwo emphasized the chances of disaffiliation and neglect of religious activities, thus:

> If the senior is someone who doesn't get involved in most of the activities, as a "school son" you try to learn from him. Because your "father" is not going, sometimes he will ask you to do something for him when you are supposed to go to church. So, if you don't take care, you will try to follow suit (Kwadwo, 2023).

In this study, as the data suggests, crucial life decisions such as choosing one's faith and being nurtured in it are influenced by "school parenting" on SHS campuses through personal conversations, modelling, and the extent of involvement in routine activities. Seniors, who serve as mentors, play a significant role in guiding these decisions. Cloete (2012:74) contends that youths develop an integrated and Christ-centred self-perception through

1 The Christian practice of personal reading of the Bible, meditating and praying.

nurturing. The data suggests potential opportunities for such development but also recognises that negative associations can lead to a distaste for Christian activities. Furthermore, the data suggests that personal conversations, as mentioned by Bryant (2005:2), can result in both positive and negative outcomes regarding faith formation.

3.3 Exposure to risky behaviours

Duffy (2004:242–251), exploring the relationship between Christian faith and adolescent risk-taking behaviours suggests that a lack of understanding of God's plan for one's life can contribute to risk-taking behaviours. Youth mentoring is expected to promote positive choices, involvement in ethically acceptable behaviours, and improvement in the general well-being of others outside their families (Garvey & Alred, 2003:5; Allen & Eby, 2007:28).

Despite the positive impact of "school parenting" in SHS in Ghana, it also sometimes nurtures new students in risky behaviours. Tandoh's survey in 2017 concluded that Kwabena, a high school graduate from Kumasi, learned how to smoke marijuana during his time in school. One of his "school fathers" introduced him to it. Kwabena noted that two "school fathers" competed for his attention and affection, and the one with a negative influence won him. He felt that smoking marijuana helped him run faster during sports activities. Kwabena later recognized the negative influence of one of his "school fathers" on him (Tandoh, 2017).

The influence of youth mentors on mentees to make risky choices is also seen in Akwasi's reflection: "If you have a father who is morally corrupt, you will also degenerate into that. On the other hand, if you have a father who is also spiritually rooted, he will also help you spiritually" (Akwasi, 2023). Kwadwo's (2023) observation further buttresses this assertion: "New students could be lured easily into risky behaviours through some kind of well-rehearsed strategy".

The findings above reveal instances where mentoring relationships exposed new students to risky behaviours. Thus, there is a complex interplay between "school parenting" and the theological understanding that adolescents who make such risky decisions demonstrate a lack of understanding of God's plan for their lives (Duffy, 2004:242–251). This article therefore calls for deeper reflections by faith communities and supervising authorities in

SHSs. Churches and parachurch groups involved in campus ministry could consider addressing issues of students' risky behavioural choices not just as personal and moral decisions but as those that are of grave interest to God and his plan for their lives. Students could be encouraged and guided to discern this to promote their total well-being. Faith communities may also liaise with school authorities to offer guidance services that would increase students' awareness of the dangers of risky choices.

One key factor that enhances the vulnerability of the students to risky behaviour, we believe, is their developmental stage. We argue that as adolescents, they are highly susceptible to the influence of others, particularly their peers (Atkinson, Atkinson, & Hilgard, 1983:82–93; Maxwel, 2002:267–277). Some scholars have described this stage as "identity versus role confusion," "a period of heightened storm and stress," "a time of turbulence," "a mélange of biohazard," and "a frightening mistake of nature" (Grinder, 1969; Atkinson *et al.*, 1983:92–93; Males, 2009:4). The brighter side of this exposure is that adolescence has also been touted with the power of creativity, moral philosophy, and the capacity to effect change (Grinder, 1969; Turiel, 2006:8; UNESCO, 2023). Thus, students in "school parenting" can also positively influence others who are already involved in risky behaviours. Considering this, campus ministers could also utilize a form of "school parenting" by mentoring mature Christian students to employ supportive strategies that would assist peers who may be struggling with risky behaviours.

3.4 Compassion needs

"School parenting" can also impact the academic, emotional, and material needs of both mentors and mentees. Although the Great Commission has been a compelling force for many believers, Maggay (2011:46) reiterates Jesus' teaching that the greatest command is to love God and neighbour (Mt 22:34–40), and not a response to the Great Commission. Thus, in obedience to Jesus Christ, we respond to the needs of others, a stance Wright (2012:9) places on par with evangelism. In Maggay's (2011:46) view, love for one's neighbour is not just on par with evangelism but over and above preaching, teaching, and baptism, which are mentioned in the 'Great Commission'. That is, if Jesus portrays love for one's neighbour as greater

than the Great Commission, then, it is indeed greater than any component of the Great Commission.

This view receives additional support in Bosch's (2011:48) insight that love for one's neighbour is a prerequisite for loving God and that love for a neighbour is the surest way to interpret God's love. In this vein, love for our neighbours which takes its source from the love of God, demonstrates our obedience to Jesus, gives a portrait of God's love, and is as important as evangelism to Christians. Otherwise stated, we are loved by God to love our neighbours as a demonstration of our love for and obedience to God so that others can easily understand his love. This is relevant for students in campus mentoring.

In the campus context, God's love can be expressed when senior students assist juniors with their academic work and help them adapt properly to the academic rigour of the school. Consequently, some mentors assist their mentees in having personal timetables and encourage adherence to them. They also assist them in cultivating good learning habits and offer teaching assistance. "School children" who read the same course as their "parents" also benefit from their books. At Eden School, the "school son" automatically inherits his school father's academic resources in the form of books, past examination questions, school bags, school uniforms, and other relevant materials in the form of a legacy. The term used among students in that school for this kind of inheritance is *lega* – coined from "legacy." As demonstrated above, new students' academic progress can be improved by "school parents." On the other side of the win-win mentoring relationship in academics, mentees wash their mentors' clothing and run errands so that they can save time for academic work, especially during impending external examinations.

The study also found that student mentors provide social and emotional support to junior students to enable them to smoothly integrate into the school community. They help them make the needed adjustments to the new environment even before school-organized orientation sessions are done. By doing so, they make new students feel at ease and welcomed in a home away from their homes. Akwasi observed that:

> … "school parents" who get closer to their "children" can easily identify traces of stress arising from work overload, depression from

social interactions, or a feeling of loneliness from their momentary detachment from home.

Then, they can offer much-needed assistance. He feared that "new students may contemplate suicide if their social and emotional needs at this stage of life are not met" (Akwasi, 2023).

Apart from the academic, social, and emotional support, students in "school parenting" provide non-academic material support in the form of food and money. "During school breaks that required seniors to stay in school in preparation for their external examination, "kind 'children' emptied their boxes of remaining provisions for their good 'parents,' helping the seniors to have enough food for the period of stay" (Akosua, 2023).

The culture of generosity and mutual support within the school community, where students are encouraged to care for one another in practical ways, resonates with Zylla's (2017:1) view that being sensitive to the needs of others goes beyond mere knowledge of those needs. It encompasses a willingness to alleviate their pain, the ability to act for their benefit, and a commitment to maintaining ongoing involvement with those who are suffering. It is not a mere theoretical construct but a practical response to the needs of other students, which requires a conscious effort. The precaution, however, should be Sverdilk's (2008:5) position that our response to the needy must be done 'for the sake of the sufferer' and not with any ulterior motive of personal gain. In this way, we communicate God's missional agenda for us: to care for the needy in society in the generous way he does it.

3.5 Experience of social justice

In Bevans and Schroeders' (2004:9) view, mission involves Christians' opposition to injustice and oppression. Around the world, there is a growing need for a renewed commitment to justice. For instance, the theme for the world ecumenical week of prayer for Christian Unity 2023 was "Do good, seek justice" (USCCB, 2023). It was carved from Isaiah 1:17, which states, "Learn to do right; seek justice; Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." So, concerns about justice in society are not "too political for church" and other faith communities, but rather arise from God's nature, and there is a call for our participation

(Allen, 2019:4). Injustice at the student level is seen in many SHSs campuses in Ghana. Some of these acts are influenced by "school parenting."

In our reflections, we recall that bullying was mostly perpetrated in the dormitories without the knowledge of the house staff (House Master or House Mistress). Juniors were afraid to report to school authorities for fear that when teachers punished perpetrators, all the other seniors in the dormitory would hate them. However, Section 2.17 of the GES' code of conduct for SHS students frowns on all forms of violence, as it states that, "a student shall not do anything to harm another student or staff physically or psychologically" (GES, 2024:12).

Kwaku recounted:

> There was one senior. He sent me to go and fetch water for him. I came back and told him the tap was not flowing. So, I went to sleep, and in the night, he came lashing my buttocks. He woke me up in the night to go and fetch his water for him. I had to obey him before I went back to sleep (Kwaku, 2023).

Particularly, some "school parents" bullied their "children," seemingly overlooking the incongruity in adopting the title of "parent" and bullying. Kwadwo observed that "sometimes, "sons" were asked to kneel by or sing for their "fathers" as they ("fathers") studied their books or slept" (Kwadwo, 2023). Adwoa recalled that "some seniors asked juniors to fan them until they slept" (Adwoa, 2023).

The new students at SHS could experience injustice from senior students even after the first year. This is because sophomores who didn't like some final-year students planned to bully their "children" later. The student cliché around that was "You will see what happens to you when your mother completes school" (Akosua, 2023). This downside of "school parenting" reflects Bosch's (2011:11, 370) idea that evil exists in people and society, and we should stand against unjust systems, expressing God's disapproval. However, this form of human rights abuse, directly influenced by "school parenting", is sometimes trivialized by students as 'school life' and perpetrated for the fun of it.

On the positive side, "school parenting" was used as a means of stemming bullying. Some seniors relieved their "children" from this form of injustice.

Akosua mentioned that "You couldn't just mess with school daughters whose parents were firm and [who] loved their 'children'" (Akosua, 2023). In this way, this form of mentoring helped to improve justice by providing the needed support to vulnerable students on campus.

4. Conclusion

This article used Kram's (1983:613–622) conceptual model of mentoring to explore the missional impact of "school parenting" in the SHSs in Kumasi. It is premised on the fact that the "school parenting" concept in the SHSs as a culture has not received attention from youth ministers, missiologists, and the church but has implications for the missional God. The study shows that this phenomenon starts as an orientation-inspired parent-child relationship, moves onto the arenas of sharing, and leaves traces of impact – good or bad. It further illustrates how "school parenting" impacts students in the areas of faith and nurturing, exposure to risky behaviours, compassion needs, and experience of social justice, which are issues that have bearing on God's missional agenda for his creation through human participation.

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