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## Effect of Extra-Curricular Activities on Students' Spiritual Growth

Alexa Groen

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# Effect of Extra-Curricular Activities on Students' Spiritual Growth

## Abstract

The primary purpose of Christian schooling is to teach Biblical principles to our youth as we prepare them to live and serve in God's kingdom. Even though over three quarters of our youth in America participate in extra-curricular activities, little to no research has been done on the effect of extra-curricular activities on a child's spiritual development. Yet, Christian schools continue to put time, money, and energy into extra-curricular programming. To determine whether academic, personal, and athletic extra-curricular activities have kingdom implication, this study collected qualitative data from twelve students, 8th Grade to junior year of high school. Coding the interviews and identifying common themes helped to reveal the alignment between student's involvement and their spiritual development. Results show that extra-curricular activities promote students to develop the Fruit of the Spirit, Christian values, Christian character, and a deeper level of faith. In conclusion, data shows a positive relationship between students' participation in extra-curricular activities and their faith development.

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The Effect of Extra-Curricular Activities on Students' Spiritual Growth

by

Alexa Groen

Elementary Education  
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Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
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Sioux Center, Iowa  
May 2017

The Effect of Extra-Curricular Activities on Students' Spiritual Growth

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### **Abstract**

The primary purpose of Christian schooling is to teach Biblical principles to our youth as we prepare them to live and serve in God's kingdom. Even though over three quarters of our youth in America participate in extra-curricular activities, little to no research has been done on the effect of extra-curricular activities on a child's spiritual development. Yet, Christian schools continue to put time, money, and energy into extra-curricular programming. To determine whether academic, personal, and athletic extra-curricular activities have kingdom implication, this study collected qualitative data from twelve students, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade to junior year of high school. Coding the interviews and identifying common themes helped to reveal the alignment between student's involvement and their spiritual development. Results show that extra-curricular activities promote students to develop the Fruit of the Spirit, Christian values, Christian character, and a deeper level of faith. In conclusion, data shows a positive relationship between students' participation in extra-curricular activities and their faith development.

Surveys state that 79% of America's middle and high school students regularly participate in activities both after school and on weekends. (Survey: Sports, Arts, Clubs, Volunteering -- Out-of-School Activities Play Crucial, Positive Role for Kids, 2004). Research shows that these additional activities have a positive effect on students. "85% of students who participate in such activities believe that organized, structured out-of-school activities are enormously important and they feel better off than kids that do not participate" (Survey: Sports, Arts, Clubs, Volunteering -- Out-of-School Activities Play Crucial, Positive Role for Kids, 2004). With such a large percentage of students involved in extra-curricular activities, researchers have a plethora of data to analyze. They are learning why kids are drawn to extra-curricular activities and what impact these activities have on student grades, classroom participation, and overall attitude. Extra-curricular activities can be categorized into three types: sports-, academic-, or personal-related activities. Studies show that no matter what type of extra-curricular category, the activities can be beneficial to kids.

After considering all of the data that reflects the positive benefits of extra-curricular activities, a Christian teacher sees the obvious value of combining extra-curricular activities with academia. Distinctively Christian education, however, must always approach education from a Christ-centered perspective. A typical classroom consists of students from a variety of educational abilities, backgrounds, interests, and gifts. Christian educators have a calling to teach their students about God and the Biblical plan for their lives. Considering the whole-child—academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually—is obligatory in most effectively preparing them to serve in God's kingdom. Each child has been created in the image of God, therefore teaching and guiding students to be well-rounded individuals is crucial. One of the primary objectives of the Christian teacher is to further spiritual development in all students,



from the high-achieving students to those who are lower-achieving. While all of the evidence supports that students should partake in extra-curricular activities, what implications do these activities have on a child's spiritual development? Do they help or hinder a child's spiritual growth? It is essential that Christian educators help their students to most effectively achieve academic excellence and simultaneously guide them in discovering their place, their gifts, and their potential in God's world. This paper explores the effectiveness of participating in extra-curricular activities to further spiritual development.

### **Research Questions**

The fact that little research has been done on the effect of the impact of extra-curricular activities' impact on spiritual development is not surprising. In his book, the Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, George Marsden observes, "Unquestionably, one of the main reasons so few reflect on the implications of faith for learning is that they have been formed by an academic culture in which such reflection is discouraged" (Marsden, 1997, p. 4). Christian educators should not just assume that because extra-curricular activities positively influence academic achievement that they will also positively promote spiritual development. While extra-curricular activities may seem as if they align with Christian values, their effect on spiritual development still needs to be researched. According to Marsden,

It is especially important for Christian scholars to recognize that mainstream academic culture and spiritual values are often at odds. Our academic system rewards self-promotion and specialized scholarship and gives little encouragement to cultivation of virtues. Often there seems to be an inverse relationship between scholarly production and spiritual virtues. (Marsden, 1997, p. 107)

On the one hand, involvement in extra-curricular activities could further spiritual growth. However, on the other hand, extra-curricular activities could potentially inhibit spiritual

development. Perhaps there is a fine line between the two. The research questions to be investigated include:

- What impact do extra-curricular activities have on students' spiritual development?
  - What is the relationship between academic extra-curricular activities and spiritual growth?
  - What is the relationship between athletic extra-curricular activities and spiritual growth?
  - What is the relationship between personal extra-curricular activities and spiritual growth?

### **Definitions**

A basic understanding of the terms used is necessary for thoughtful consideration of this research project. These terms must be defined before attempting to answer the questions aforementioned. Unless otherwise referenced, the definitions are those of the author.

#### ***Christian***

The belief in Biblical teachings; God created the world, sent His son (Jesus Christ) to die on the cross, die, and rise again, knowing that He will come again.

#### ***Extra-curricular Activities***

Activities (academic or athletic) that are offered by a school for students to participate in, but are not part of the course of study or regular schedule of classes. (Merriam-Webster's Learner Dictionary)

#### ***Whole-Child***

A whole child approach to education is defined by policies, practices, and relationships that ensure each child, in each school, in each community, is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. (ASCD)

### Literature Review

The study on the effects of extra-curricular activities on spiritual development is significant, because at this point little to no research has been done on this topic. Yet, approximately 80% of students spend valuable time involved in such activities, and most schools spend valuable money on extra-curricular programs. A 2016 study indicates a rise in the average cost per child involved in extra-curricular activities. Parents, on average, will pay \$739 per child participating in sports during the 2016-2017 school year (White, 2016). An overwhelming amount of data suggests that extra-curricular activities positively affect a child's academic achievement, classroom behavior, and school perception, though not much research has been done to determine if extra-curricular activities can shape students' spiritual growth.

The positive effect of extra-curricular involvement on academic achievement is verified by considerable statistical evidence. The study *Extra-Curricular Activities and Academic Performance in Secondary Students* randomly selected twelve schools, both public and private, and randomly assigned two hundred and twenty-two students into two groups based on whether or not they were involved in after-school, extra-curricular activities. The study revealed that "students in the extra-curricular activity group obtained significantly better results" when considering academic performance of students in extra-curricular activities verses those not involved in extra-curricular activities (Moriana, Alos, Alcalá, Pino, Herruzo, & Ruiz, 2006). The analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed these results. The study especially showed a positive correlation for those who participated in academic or study-related activities, such a tutoring or private instruction (Lane). Similarly, those who participated in sport-related activities benefited as well, though not quite to the extent of those who were involved in academic-related activities (Moriana, Alos, Alcalá, Pino, Herruzo, & Ruiz, 2006). Interestingly enough, however, "for most families, academics are not the foremost reason for having students be involved" (Survey:

Sports, Arts, Clubs, Volunteering -- Out-of-School Activities Play Crucial, Positive Role for Kids, 2004). “Only 15% of parents in the national survey felt that academic achievement is the best reason for kids to be involved in organized activities” (Survey: Sports, Arts, Clubs, Volunteering -- Out-of-School Activities Play Crucial, Positive Role for Kids, 2004). Most parents encourage their students to participate in extra-curricular activities simply to foster their children’s interests, values, and growth. Another primary reason is to broaden their students’ social skills.

Student behavior is also positively affected by a child’s involvement in extra-curricular activities. Children of all ages, even young children, can benefit from the involvement of extra-curricular activities. The *Young School-Aged Children’s Behaviour and Their Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities* project, which took a survey of 906 mothers’ perspectives on their child’s behavior being affected by extra-curricular involvement, found that children who participated in extra-curricular activities had fewer behavioral issues than those who did not. Research suggests that children benefit from participating in two or more activities for 80-90 minutes per week (Simoncini & Caltabiono, 2012). The effect of extra-curricular activities on student participation and success was also clearly identified by the National Center for Education Statistics. In their data, they found that participants in extra-curricular activities reported better attendance than their non-participating classmates (O’Brien, 1995).

Extra-curricular activities also boost the perception of learning for all students. Involved students have a better attitude toward school and take their learning more seriously. Extra-curricular activities are not only good for high-achieving students, but also for students who are considered at-risk and for those who have special needs. Schools that offer extra-curricular activities provide a more comprehensive education. Students with special needs often thrive

when included in extra-curricular activities. The study *Still “More of the Same for the More Able?” Including Young Disabled People and Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Extra-Curricular Physical Education* by Haycock and Smith discusses essential implications for why students with special needs ought to be included in extra-curricular activities, especially physical education or sport-related activities (Haycock & Smith, 2011). Unfortunately, reports show that in many cases schools have a difficult time including students with special needs in their extra-curricular programming. In fact, in most schools, the students with disabilities were “provided with a limited and narrow range of sports and physical activities in which to participate” (Haycock & Smith, 2011). Sadly, research shows that in the cases where students with disabilities were given the opportunity to be involved with extra-curricular activities, such as clubs or teams, “they were often taught separately from other pupils who were non-disabled” (Haycock & Smith, 2011). Nonetheless, the experience of being involved with the team or club promotes a feeling of connectedness, self-worth, and positivity towards school.

Although a variety of articles have been written regarding the positive effects of extra-curricular activities on academics, classroom behavior, and school perception, virtually no research can be found on the relationship between extra-curricular activities and spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is not the focus of most public-institutions, though it should be the primary focus of Christian education. Christian schools have also seen the necessity of implementing extra-curricular activities in their schools; unfortunately, they have no clear-cut understanding of how these activities are affecting students spiritually. This study helps to determine if time in extra-curricular activities is time well spent in shaping students to be citizens in Christ’s Kingdom. When and where is spiritual development occurring in the lives of students? How are their leaders encouraging spiritual growth? Data suggests that teachers can

exhibit behaviors and practices during instructional times or school day activities that communicate spiritual values to the students they teach (Mohler, 2013). The article proceeds to share that times such as devotions, Bible class, chapel, singing, memory work recitation, and mentoring are areas most commonly identified as spiritual growth development times during the day. Kennedy shares in his article, *Extracurricular Activities: Why They Are So Important*, “extracurricular activities are an integral part of the school’s offerings. Solid academics, a variety of athletic programs and an assortment of extracurricular activities are essential in private schools” (Kennedy, 2016). This study expounds on Kennedy’s findings and attempts to determine whether or not time spent in extra-curricular activities is spiritually beneficial for students.

James Fowler, another researcher committed to the study of spiritual development formed a theory entitled, *Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development*, which includes six stages of faith development that people pass through as their faith deepens and matures. The stages of faith in progressive order include Intuitive-Projective, Mythic-Literal, Synthetic-Conventional, Individual-Reflective, Conjunctive Faith, and Universalizing.

Intuitive-Progressive, Stage 1, is often associated with preschool-age children in which fantasy and reality are mixed. In this beginning stage, young children often develop their first thoughts about God from their parents and society. Stage 2, Mythic-Literal, pertains to school-aged children who learn and accept the Biblical stories in literal ways. Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional, often occurs during the teenage years when an all-encompassing belief system is adopted. Teens struggle to see outside their box and do not realize they are inside a belief system. Stage 4, Individual-Reflective, is when critical examination of the other “boxes” or religions occur. These individuals challenge beliefs and consequently strengthen their understanding of their own beliefs and others’ beliefs. Stage 5, Conjunctive Faith is usually only met during mid-life. People in this stage see life as a mystery and accept the paradoxes in life. Stage 6, universalizing, is rare for most people. Those who reach stage six live their lives to fully serve others without worries or doubts.” (Fowler, 1981)

The connection between Fowler's stages of faith development and the spiritual development is noteworthy. When considering the criteria of each level, one can more clearly measure where an individual may fall within the stages of spirituality.

How spiritual formation occurs in adolescents is another aspect that holds an immense amount of value in this research project when coding whether or not extra-curricular activities are impacting students' spiritual development. Dr. Allen Jackson in his article, *How do You Measure a Teen's Spiritual Growth*, introduces some of the challenges and struggles. He highlights that moral decisions are not always guided by faith, belief does not equal "devoted," and spiritual growth is not always predicable or sequential (Jackson, 2014). Yet, despite these irregularities between participants, a correlation between spiritual development and the adolescence years still seems to exist. Jackson concludes his article sharing that, "the high school years may be the most critical for spiritual formation. About 75% of my [his] students (studying to be ministers) indicated that something happened in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade that changed or challenged their spiritual maturity." Another researcher who focused on spiritual development in adolescent aged students was Mark Driscoll. Driscoll provides thirteen ways to foster spiritual development. The ideas that he concluded foster spiritual growth include reading the Bible, praying, getting involved in a healthy church, joining a small church-group, singing worship songs, reading Christian books, sharing Jesus with non-Christians, giving financially, serving others, learning to forgive, being open to developing new gifts/talents for God's glory, journaling thoughts/prayers with God, and reminding yourself daily that God is your Father and He loves you (Driscoll, 2016). Some of these themes have emerged from the data; the research study shows a positive correlation between extra-curricular activities and the fostering of spiritual development in adolescents and teens.

Spiritual development is also usually aided by the support, encouragement, and guidance of a leader. The journal article entitled *School Leaders and Spirituality* shares that students believe that, “spiritual leadership is an active, personal process for each individual” (Banke, 2012). Several areas of utmost importance were identified in the study to point out attributes of leaders who promoted spiritual growth most effectively. The most influential spiritual leaders valued “relationships with others, provided for needs and opportunities, and exhibited a personal relationship with God. Spiritual leaders are real and accessible; willing to mentor, encourage, and support other members of the community” (Banke, 2012).

### **Summary**

While the effect of extra-curricular activities has had statistical significance in the areas of improving academic performance, classroom behavior, and school perception, little to no evidence has been produced to begin the discussion of the effect that extra-curricular activities has had on spiritual development. Christian educators believe that all aspects of schooling should be Christ-focused. One of their primary objectives is to further the spiritual growth of their students. Educators strive to prepare the whole child for effective service in God’s kingdom. The supremacy of God does not stop at the door of the classroom; rather, it must be infused throughout all of the school activities and beyond. This research project tests the null hypothesis that extra-curricular activities in moderation positively impact spiritual development. Interviewing students and coaches/leaders provides insight on the effect that extra-curricular activities have on students’ spiritual development. The goal of these activities needs to be closely aligned with the schools’ overall goal of preparing students for God’s Kingdom work.

### **Topic Limitations/Topic Expansion**

This research paper focuses on students’ spiritual development through extra-curricular activities. The study involves multiple interviews with adolescent students; unfortunately,



however, the study also has limitations. The students chosen are all from private Chicago-land schools whereas the data is generalized to a larger population. The effect on spiritual development through extra-curricular activities may vary if data were taken from rural schools or schools from different parts of the country. Researchers must acknowledge that when generalizing data from a sample, sampling errors always need to be taken into consideration.

Another limitation that was discovered during this study was the uncertainty between the relationships correlated. It cannot be drawn from the data whether participation in extra-curricular activities leads to spiritual growth or whether those who see the importance of spiritual development are more inclined to participate in extra-curricular activities.

During the study of this topic, it was discovered that a very limited amount of studies differentiate between the type of extra-curricular involvement. The majority of the studies lumped athletic-, academic-, and personal-related extra-curricular activities together in the data. This caused difficulty in identifying the type of activity that most effectively impacted a child's academics, school behavior, and school perception. Additional data needs to be compiled to look further at the impact of extra-curricular activities in these previously-mentioned areas. This research study will distinguish between the types of extra-curricular activities in light of spiritual development.

To further the research that has been done with this study, *The Effect of Extra-curricular Activities on Students' Spiritual Growth*, one may consider studying the effect of students' spiritual growth when involved in multiple types of extra-curricular activities. Does involvement in both athletic-related and academic-related activities increase a child's spiritual growth? What effects would extra-curricular activities have on a child who is involved in all three areas?

Researching the amount of hours involved in extra-curricular activities and the amount of spiritual development would also be a valuable study to extend the research that has been done in this project. Discovering the line between how much is enough and how much is too much may be challenging, but worth-while for students who are both committed to their faith and to their involvement in extra-curricular activities.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants:**

This study was performed using participants in 8<sup>th</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Participants' ages ranged from thirteen to seventeen. An equal number of males and females were interviewed. A total of twelve students' responses were used in the collection of the data. Three participants were selected from each grade-level. They were classified by their involvement in three categories: students involved in athletic extra-curricular activities, students involved in personal extra-curricular activities, and students involved in athletic extra-curricular activities. The participants are enrolled in private Christian schools in the Chicago-land area. Both the elementary school and the high school are located in Lansing, Illinois, a south suburb of Chicago. Lansing is a diverse community comprised of approximately forty-two thousand people.

#### **Materials:**

The main source of data collection for this study was through student interviews. Each participant was asked six to eight interview questions. Each interview was semi-structured and lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The data was recorded and transcribed for the benefit of future researchers. Coding was used to identify common themes within the interviews in each of the three areas of extra-curricular activities.

#### **Design:**

The effect of extra-curricular activities on a child's spiritual development is a qualitative study. As common themes emerged, they were compared against key ways spiritual formation occurs in adolescence and in the teenage years. This comparison shows the correlation with being involved in athletic-, personal-, and/or academic extra-curricular activities and growing spiritually.

**Procedure:**

When the participants were met, they were greeted as normal. They were asked if they would be willing to complete a short interview that deals with their extra-curricular activities and their spiritual development. All of the participants agreed and were taken to a quiet location for the interview. The participant and the interviewer sat across from one another and the interviewer had a list of pre-written questions. The student was told that their responses would be recorded to be reflected upon for this research study. The researcher encouraged real and honest responses from the participant. Then, the interviewer began with the pre-determined set of questions. The interviews were semi-structured, so deviation away from the original questions was permissible to gather further data in areas of interest that would help provide constructive information for the purpose of this study. At the end of the interview the student was thanked for their time and dismissed.

**Data Analysis:**

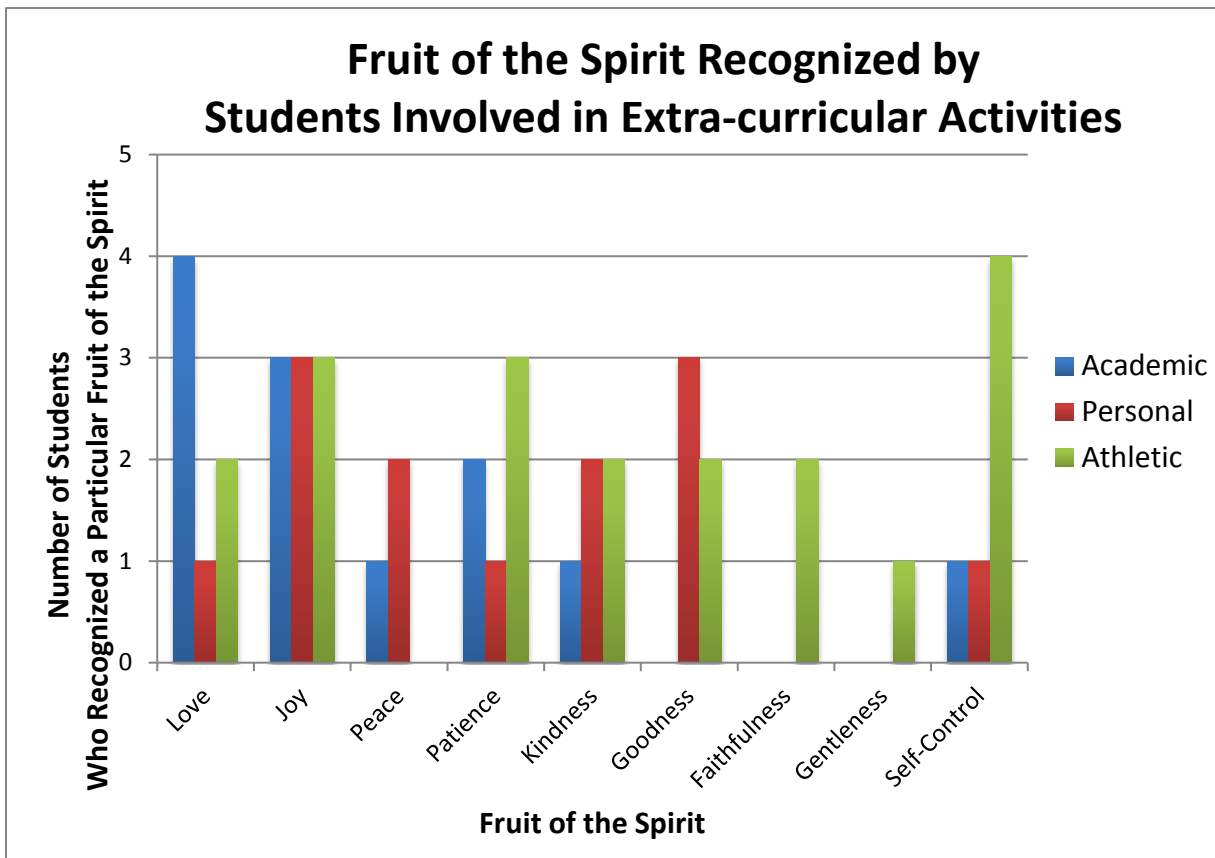
The common findings were discovered through comparisons across interviews. When themes were mentioned with frequency, additional consideration was given to those responses. The data analysis was compiled through coding the data and looking for patterns, categories, and themes. The null hypothesis stated that the findings would show a positive correlation between the participation in extra-curricular activities and spiritual growth.

## Results

### **Theme 1: Extra-curricular Activities and Fruit of the Spirit**

The Bible provides God's people with a list of Fruit of the Spirit that will be evident in the lives of Christians when following God's Word and His kingdom plan. "The Fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23a). Sometimes a Christian may struggle to display one or more of the examples of Fruit, for example, patience or self-control. A Christian deeply rooted in Christ continually works to grow the Fruit of the Spirit in their life. Fruit is evidence of the Lord working in one's heart. Colossians 2:6-7 reminds us, "Therefore, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in him, established in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." If someone is without Christ, they will be unable to bear His fruit. Likewise, John 15:4 says, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (The Holy Bible, NIV, 2011).

When measuring spiritual development, one must carefully consider the Fruit that are being produced through daily actions, words, and deeds. While interviewing, if students mentioned a Fruit of the Spirit, their answers were recorded and graphed. Four students were interviewed from each of the categories: academic, personal, and athletic extra-curricular activities. The responses are recorded in the graph (*Figure 1*) found below.



*Figure 1*

The Fruit of the Spirit were frequently mentioned during the interview responses. Two primarily important, aligned responses can be noted in the graph above. First, all of the students involved in *academic* extra-curricular activities mention being more loving towards others. Consequently, *love* is a Fruit of the Spirit that has grown since their involvement in *academic* extra-curricular activities. Second, all of the participants involved in *athletic* extra-curricular activities note examples of how their involvement in *athletic* extra-curricular activities plays a vital role in helping them to develop *self-control*. Other examples of Fruit of the Spirit that were more commonly mentioned include *joy*, *patience*, and *kindness*. Another notable outcome is that with only four participants, all of the Fruit of the Spirit were recognized.

The participants were consciously aware of the development of the Fruit of the Spirit in their personal lives. They gave multiple examples as a testament to this awareness. For instance, Paul shared how he feels his understanding of *love* has developed through participating in the Right to Life in Washington D.C, a *personal* extra-curricular activity. He reflected, “I believe love is a big part of the trip. We have to love everyone [even the unborn], because we have all been made in God’s image.” He concluded his interview by stating, “It [the Pro-Life trip] was a blessing from God and one trip I’d like to go on again” (Smit, 2017). Nolan is another student who has developed Fruit of the Spirit by being involved in *personal* extra-curricular activities. He is a leader of the Illiana Loud Crowd and provided an example of how his involvement has fostered *self-control* in his life. He talked about cheering in the stands with a mob of other students and said, “Self-control is big. We could yell anything, but we try to show Jesus to others” (Rogan, 2017). Rachele, a freshman, shared her experience of being involved in Theology Club, an academic extra-curricular activity. Themes of *love* and *peace* were at the forefront of what she has learned through her extra-curricular involvement. “It [Theology Club] helps me to learn to love and accept others. We listen to one another’s perspectives and don’t judge them on their different views.” Each week they have different topics and speakers to allow people to learn about new topics, but also share their opinions in light of Christian perspective. “You get to know others better, trials they have gone through and what they have overcome” (Bosman, 2017).

## **Theme 2: Extra-curricular Activities and Attributes of Christian Character**

Similar to Fruit of the Spirit, a Christian will exhibit Christian character. For example, a Christian life should be characterized by integrity, and humility. Christians are likely to hold ethical values like serving community, giving encouragement, being honest, living courageously,

building self-esteem, and being empowered. Christian character can be used to measure the relationship between one's involvement in extra-curricular activities and their spiritual growth.

The emphasis of community was a common theme of many responses. Roxanna's "friends and coaches on her math team encourage her and help her to have good values" (Groen, 2017). Through participation in the Right to Life March, Paul has "learned to be a leader in the community. I show Christ's love to people beyond my school activities" (Smit, 2017). Laura talks about how "on cheerleading we love each other. We are like a family" (Wicklund, 2017). The idea of community is prevalent in the Bible as well. Romans 12:4-5 conveys, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Christians have a sense of community when they recognize their place in God's kingdom and acknowledge the importance of others and their gifts as well.

Encouragement was another attribute of Christian character that many of the youth felt they learned during their extra-curricular activity. 1 Thessalonians 5:11a commands Christians to, "encourage one another and build each other up." Students from all areas: *academic*, *personal*, and *athletic* extra-curricular activities mentioned how encouragement goes hand-in-hand with being involved. Halie acknowledged, "On Praise Crowd they told us to encourage others and stand up for them. This has taught me to be brave and help people out" (Persenaire, 2017). Nolan also brought up the idea of encouragement. He talked about how Loud Crowd is meant to encourage the varsity basketball players, but it has "also helped me to be able to encourage others in the real world more naturally" (Rogan, 2017).

Honesty was identified as an attribute of spiritual development that Nicholas credited to his involvement in baseball. Nicholas confessed, "I see myself as average when it comes to

spiritual development. My honesty, though, I would credit to playing baseball. Cheating is not easy to do in baseball, so it isn't a thought in other activities" (Standish, 2017). Nicholas was taught to be honest during his time on the baseball team, and honesty has spilled over into other areas of his life. Nicholas' story demonstrates the truth of Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (The Holy Bible, NIV, 2011).

The idea of building courage and self-esteem was another Christian attribute revealed in the students' responses. Briehannah was able to tie her *personal* extra-curricular activities specifically to courage. "Prop Set-up has helped me to get to know people, and it gives me courage to get to know more people" (Pickard, 2017). Briehannah has overcome her shy personality and is more confident to share Christ with her unchristian friends. Courageous character is evidenced in Biblical stories such as Joshua and the fall of Jericho, David and Goliath, Daniel in the lions' den, and ultimately Jesus on the cross. Similarly, building self-esteem is another example of Christian character revealed during the interview process.

Emmanuel touched briefly on building self-esteem. "Learning German has helped to connect my family. It helps to build my self-esteem because I teach my Grandpa" (Montanez, 2017).

Being empowered is also an attribute of Christian character that was mentioned by a participant. Paul shared that his *personal* extra-curricular activity has helped to empower him for God's Kingdom. Paul articulated, "Going on Right to Life caused me to realize that I'm not alone in this fight against the devil. You come to realize that fact after walking amidst 350,000 pro-lifers in Washington D.C." (Smit, 2017). Hebrews 12:1 is closely tied with Paul's example. The verse calls us to surround ourselves with other Christians to run towards the ultimate goal. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off

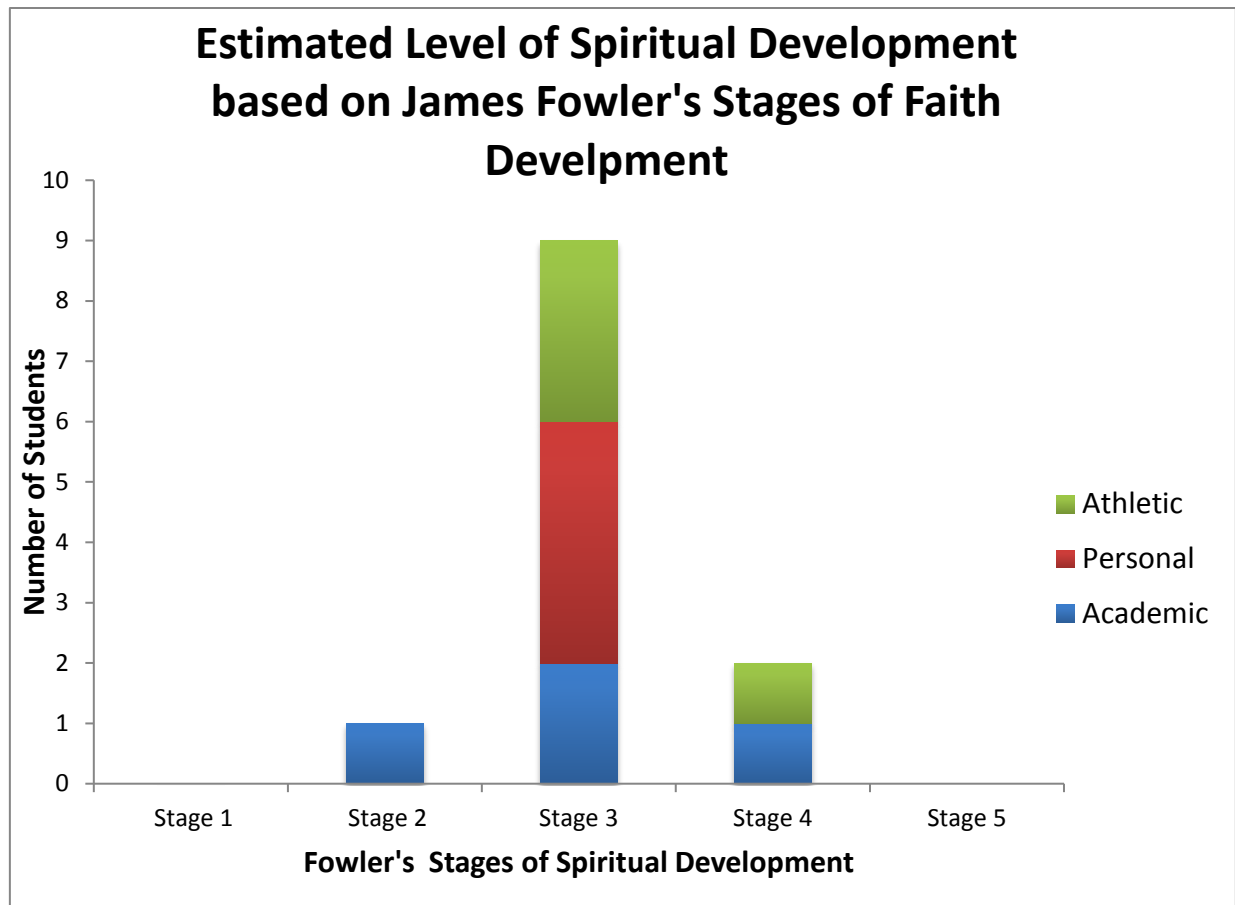


everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (The Holy Bible, NIV, 2011). A Christian is reliant upon the Holy Spirit’s empowerment to run the race set before him/her.

### **Theme 3: Extra-curricular activities and Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development**

Each child has different circumstances in their life that help to develop their understanding of the world in which they live. As they go through stages, they develop, they learn, and they experience the world in a new way. Similarly, Christians go through stages of faith development. *Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development* set basic criteria for six levels of spiritual development. These stages were helpful in identifying where each student was at in their spiritual life.

After meeting and interviewing each study participant, they were categorized into a stage of faith development based on the language and answers they provided during the study. The graphed results can be viewed below (*Figure 2*).



*Figure 2*

Data shows that most of the participants are in Stage 3 of *Fowler's Stages of Faith Development*. Stage 3 is the expected stage for the age-group that was interviewed. These responses acknowledge a belief, but rely on individuals or groups to stabilize religion. Halie's response aligns with Stage 3 terminology. "Being involved in track has helped me to grow in my spiritual life because I have people to encourage me. They encourage me to pray and read devotions" (Persenaire, 2017). Her answer shows that she remains supported by her team in her faith development. Her lack of critically examining why she has founded her beliefs shows she is in the Synthetic-Conventional Stage of *Fowler's Stages of Faith Development*.

Finding that some participants also had language that fit into Stage 4 was eye-opening. Katasha, a sophomore at Illiana Christian was one of the students that seemed to be moving into Stage 4. She wrote, “I feel that being involved in Fine Arts helps grow my spiritual development, because I connect with other students, and we can share our opinions about the Bible” (Kezia, 2017). She then proceeded to reflect on the fact that people understand things differently and it has helped her to see the Bible in a new light. She seemed to be in the Individuative-Reflective Stage of Fowler’s States of Faith. Those involved in academic or athletic extra-curricular activities were slightly more apt to be in a higher stage of faith development, when compared to those interviewed who were involved in personal extra-curricular activities.

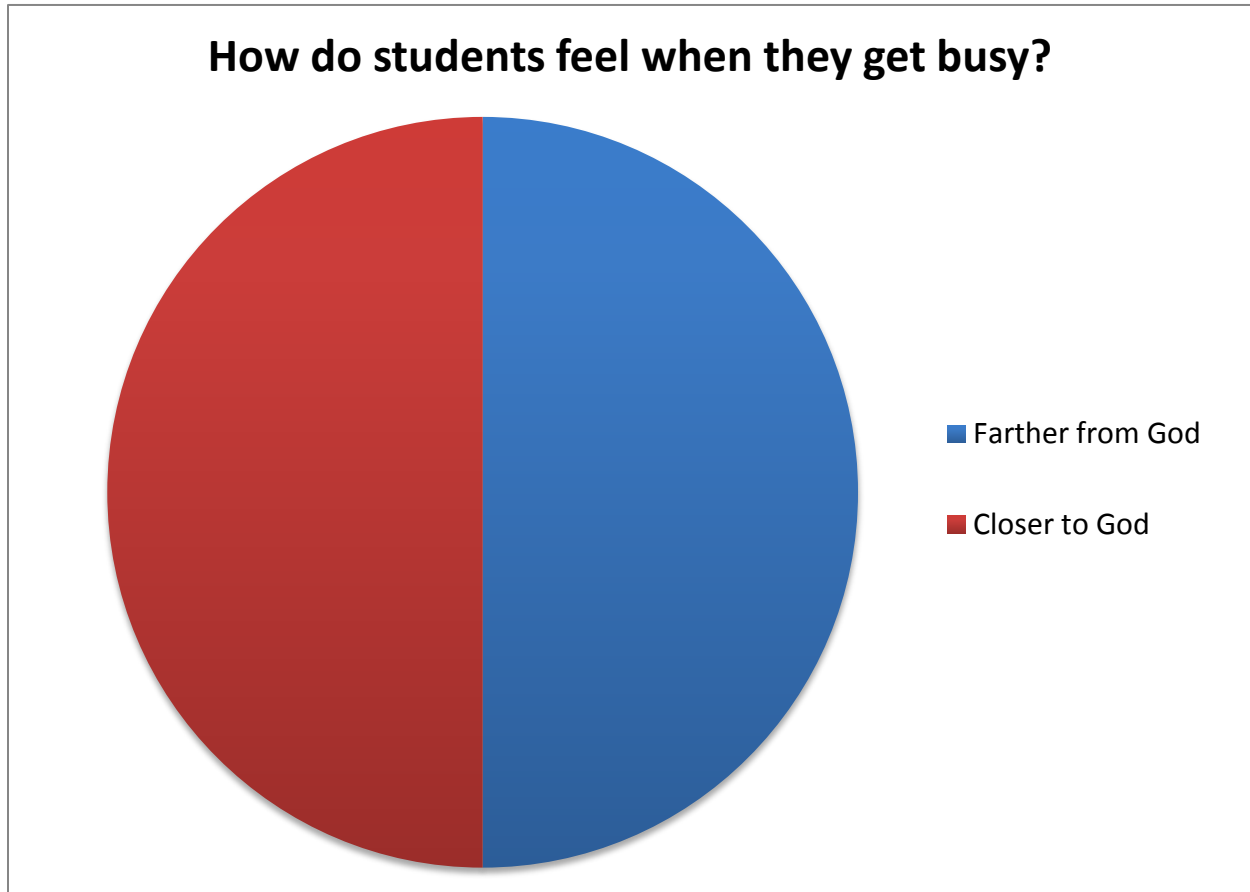
#### **Theme 4: Time Spent in Extra-curricular Activities and Impact on Spiritual Growth**

Attending practices, playing games, and participating in school-related special events take a significant amount of time out of a student’s schedule. For the students involved in this study, the mean for the number of hours spent in extra-curricular activities is 10.5 hours per week. Interestingly enough, these demands on a student’s time may bring him/her farther from *or* closer to God. On one hand, when students get overwhelmed, they may feel farther from God because their time with God is scarce. Building one’s relationship with God takes time. God wants to have a relationship with His people. He calls Christians in Joshua 1:8 to take time to meditate on His Word. “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” If students are too busy, they may feel that they do not have enough alone time with God. On the other hand, students who are overwhelmed with the stresses of life may recognize a need to cast their burdens on the Lord, especially during these hectic times. Consequently, they

spend more time in prayer seeking God’s strength, guidance, and/or peace. Some have learned, as 1 Peter 5:7 suggests, to “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

When too much involvement in extra-curricular activities causes stress in life, do those involved feel that they turn to God or do they feel that their relationship with God is strained?

The graph below (*Figure 3*) displays participants’ responses to this challenging dilemma.



*Figure 3*

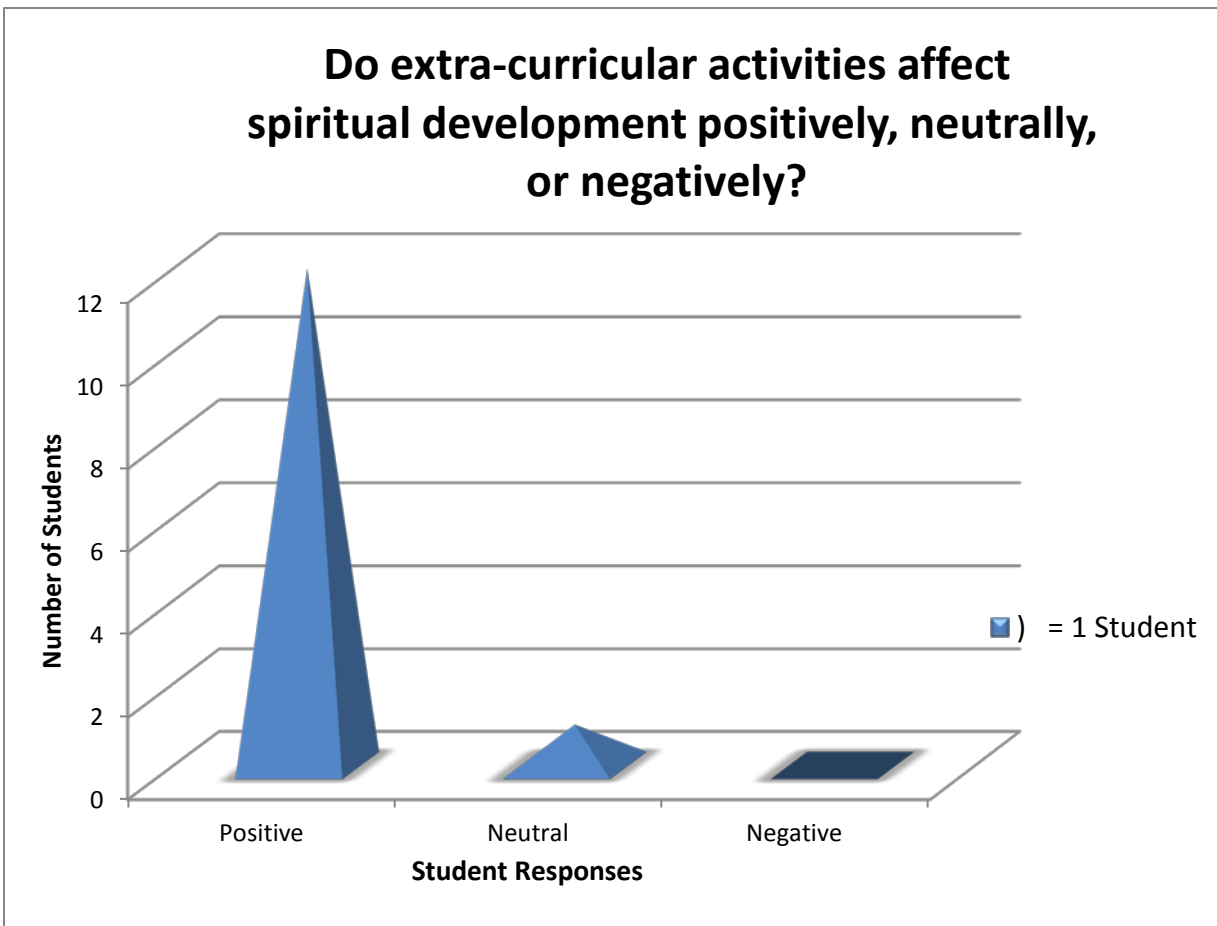
A lack of strong correlation was found in how students respond to handling busyness and spiritual development. Fascinatingly, the research was split down the middle, with half of the students feeling distant from God during busy times and half drawing closer to Him. The students who felt farther from God all felt farther for basically the same reason: no time to spend in relationship with Him. Instead, the demands of their extra-curricular activities shifted their

focus off God and instead toward the items on their schedules. Roxanna was one of the individuals who felt farther from God when life got busy, “I feel farther because I am so busy thinking about the rest of my life” (Groen, 2017). Briehannah also “feels that sometimes it [my relationship with God] grows farther apart depending on how busy I am in life” (Pickard, 2017).

On the contrary, the students who felt closer to God during the busy times in life all shared about how they would grow closer to Him because they needed His leading and support. Laura trusts God during the difficult times. She knows, “God is always with me no matter how hard it gets” (Wicklund, 2017). She values the time her coach spends praying with her cheerleading squad. Timothy spoke of personal experiences and shared that, “sometimes you want to quit, but I look to him and find strength. This makes my relationship closer to Him in the busy times” (Tristen, 2017).

### **Theme 5: Extra-curricular Activities and Participants’ Reflections**

Students who are experiencing the extra-curricular activities will likely feel a positive or negative correlation between extra-curricular activities and their spiritual walk with the Lord. In conclusion of the interview, each participant was asked whether they felt as if the extra-curricular activities in which they participate have had a positive impact on their spiritual development. The responses from the participants are graphed below (*Figure 4*).



*Figure 4*

Eleven out of twelve students answered with no hesitation, “Yes, their involvement in extra-curricular activities helps their spiritual growth.” It should be noted that one participant failed to see how his extra-curricular activity impacted his spiritual life. Overall, this study shows a strong positive correlation between being involved in extra-curricular activities—whether academic, personal and athletic--and spiritual development.

### **Interpreting Results**

Students feel the skills they develop during their involvement in extra-curricular activities are essential to their Christian faith. One must be careful, though, to balance the time spent in after-school programs. Other areas of life such as family time, alone time with God, rest, and

non-structured activities also can have a tremendous amount of benefit in one's life. A handful of students also participate in their church's Student-Life program, which is a church-related way to nurture one's faith. Programs such as this can also play an important role in developing faith in young people. Carefully considering the demands of life and how one performs under the stresses of life would be important for youth to consider prior to joining in new activities.

While being involved in extra-curricular activities is not the only way to nurture Christian faith, data from this study shows that extra-curricular activities can promote Christian values and character. Numerous other benefits come from participating in extra-curricular activities. Extra-curricular activities, in a variety of ways, help youth practice and develop the Fruit of the Spirit. Participants spoke of situations during practices and games in which they had to practice patience, peace, or self-control. Other participants reported the joy they feel when being included on a team. God has given us the gift of life and He wants us to discover our gifts and talents. When students are a part of a team, they are able to experience the Christian community while working toward a common goal. Many students also acknowledged that their team or group supports them, encouraging them to walk with the Lord. A network of teammates can also turn into friends that have one's back when needed.

The results reveal that through extra-curricular activities, young people are applying skills that enable them to be able to talk about their faith--and have confidence to do it among their peers. Multiple interviews revealed that extra-curricular activities helped shy people become motivated to open up and more vocal people to become leaders through their involvement.

Christian coaches are another important factor in fostering Christian attributes within the students with whom they work, teach, and coach. Several students mentioned how their coaches

led by example. It would be intriguing to research if individuals felt closer to God in the busy times, because they had coaches who modeled dependence on Christ during their active seasons. As a coach myself, I recognize that I teach sports to children who have been made in God's image. Consequently, many life lessons are taught in practice and at games. I consciously infuse my faith into our prayer time and into my relationships with my athletes. I also expect that they treat their teammates with love and common courtesy and competitors with integrity and sportsmanship.

Christian coaches can have a powerful impact on the spiritual development of their athletes. Embedding Christian values intentionally can maximize the positive Christian influence of coaches. One way Lansing Christian School has tried to keep their coaches aligned with Biblical coaching is by providing coaches with a Coaches Self-Evaluation (*Appendix B*). The evaluation allows the coach to reflect on their areas of strength, neutral areas, and areas in need of improvement.

### **Limitations**

Knowing the limitations of research studies is crucial. This study, like others, has limitations that may slant the implications of the results. One of the major limitations in qualitative research is self-reporting. No investigating was done on whether the participants truly acted out what they shared during the interviews. The answers they provided during the interviews may not align with their daily actions and/or behaviors. Also, growing up in a Christian environment, the participants may have been taught to use religious terminology that does not actually correlate with their level of spiritual development.

Another downfall to this study is that we cannot be sure if extra-curricular activities promote students' spiritual development or if more spiritually-developed students choose to take



part in these types of after-school groups. Another study could explore the spiritual development differences between students who are and who are not in extra-curricular activities, as this study only considered the development of students who took part in various extra-curricular categories.

Sample size, demographics, and long-term effects are other limitations of this study. A larger sample size or gathering data in other areas of the country may yield different results than the data that was collected in this research study. Also, it would be interesting to interview an adult population to determine if extra-curricular activities that they had participated in during their grade-school or high-school years had any spiritual effect on them today. My null hypothesis would be that extra-curricular activities do have a long-term effect on individuals' spiritual growth.

### **Conclusion**

Given the amount of time, energy, and effort that goes into extra-curricular activities, it is important to look at the impact of extra-curricular activities on youths' spiritual development. Measuring and finding the positive relationship between academic, personal, and athletic extra-curricular activities is essential before allowing our young people to spend considerable hours involved in such activities. If extra-curricular activities do not aid spiritual development, then Christians would need to reconsider the hours they devote to them.

The exploration in this study showed that students who were involved in extra-curricular activities were actually experiencing positive impact on their spiritual development. A positive relationship between student extra-curricular involvement and the growth of the Fruit of the Spirit was identified through the data collected. It remains unclear why some students feel closer to God during busy times, and others feel their relationship strained when stressed. In either situation students would do well to monitor carefully their time involved. Finding a balance in

life is always helpful, between daily tasks and devotional time. One must make time for meditating on God's word and for seeking God's presence since devotional time is necessary to maintain a relationship with God.

Students in extra-curricular activities also demonstrated that they were building Christian character and values. They have had opportunities to engage with Christian peers, encourage one another, practice honesty, and build their own courage and self-esteem. Finding these common themes of positive impact was reassuring. With certainty, private Christian schools can be commemorated for providing these programs and for encouraging our young people to be involved. This research study found that all students who take part in extra-curricular activities in Christian schools were able to identify positive associations between their extra-curricular activity and their faith development.

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## Appendix A

**The interview questions that were used as a guide for semi-structured interviews during this research study.**

### **Spiritual Development and Extra-curricular Activities**

1. How does being involved in \_\_\_\_\_ help to develop your heart, mind, soul, and strength?
  - Heart—
  - Mind—
  - Soul—
  - Strength--
2. Where do you see yourself when it comes to spiritual development? What attributes of spiritual *growth* would you give towards your involvement in \_\_\_\_\_?
3. Does being involved in \_\_\_\_\_ help you to show the Fruits of the Spirit? If yes, how and which fruits do you feel are most commonly tied to your extra-curricular involvement? (*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control*)
4. In what ways do feel that being involved in extra-curricular grows your spiritual development and Christian values?
5. When you get busy, do you feel that your relationship with God is closer or farther?
6. Share one story about how your involvement in \_\_\_\_\_extra-curricular activities helped you outside of extra-curricular activities.

## Appendix B

**The Coaches Self-Evaluation provided by the Lansing Christian School athletic director.**

### Coaches Self-Evaluation

**Reflect on each question, identify each question as an area of strength,  
a neutral areas, or an area in need of improvement**

1. In my program is the spirit, as well as the letter of the rule, emphasized?
2. Do I help build Christian character, not just bodies?
3. Do I encourage the athletes to think more highly of others than themselves?
4. Am I as enthusiastic about their classroom as I am about the locker room?
5. Do I approach winning not as the ultimate criteria of success, but as a byproduct of success?
6. Do I remember that my student-athletes are students first?
7. Are my actions reflective of my words? In other words, “do I walk it as I talk it?”
8. Do I strive to have my presence appreciated, not tolerated?
9. Do I give the officials the respect and cooperation that they have diligently earned?
10. Do I teach the purpose behind the plan?
11. Do I use the game to reinforce spiritual principles?
12. Do I keep my focus on the athlete in the game?
13. Are ethical behaviors and attitudes fostered as well as good performance?
14. Would I be proud to have my own children observe my behavior during any given practice?
15. Do I work at developing the skills of all the team members?
16. Do I “take out” my frustrations on the team and individuals?
17. Do I exemplify Jesus Christ?
18. Do I treat my assistant coaches as fellow shepherds instead of sheep?
19. Do I support and promote the school’s athletic policies to athletes and parents?
20. Are my practices “fliers” between games, or applied preparation for the upcoming event?
21. Do I lay my coaching concerns before the Lord?
22. Do I receive personal satisfaction in what I am doing?
23. Do I remember that fun and enjoyment are vital elements of athletics for all persons involved?
24. Do I respect my fellow coaches like I wish to be respected?