

The impact of branding an educational institution 'Methodist'

Final report

October 2008

School of Business and Social Sciences
Roehampton University

Commissioned by the Education Office of the
Methodist Church and funded by the Southlands Methodist Centre

The **Methodist** Church 

**Roehampton
University** 
London





Roehampton University

School of Business and Social Sciences
Southlands College
Roehampton University
80 Roehampton Lane
London
SW15 5SL

Research team:

Alison O'Shea
Cornelia Wilson
Joanne Sibthorpe
Edward Collins
Email: E.Collins@roehampton.ac.uk

Alison O'Shea, Cornelia Wilson and Joanne Sibthorpe are Research Officers in the Social Research Centre in the School of Business and Social Sciences. Edward Collins is Lecturer in Marketing and Management in the school.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Southlands Methodist Centre for the funding and support they have given the project. We would also like to thank the steering group; Peter Briggs, Brian Drury, Jenny Impey, Lois Loudon, Lisa Nolan, Kathleen Richardson and Graham Russell for their support and guidance. We are indebted to the Methodist schools which participated in the survey; we would like to thank the Headteachers,

teaching staff, governors, chaplains, ministers, parents and pupils who gave their time so generously.

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a study into the brand 'Methodist' in schools with a Methodist foundation. The School of Business and Social Sciences, Southlands College, Roehampton University carried out the study between September 2007 and September 2008. The aim was to assess the impact of the brand 'Methodist' within an educational institution.

There are 64 primary state-maintained schools and 14 independent schools across England and Wales with a Methodist foundation. This study looks at eleven Methodist schools, drawing on the views and experiences of students, parents of students, staff, governors, and associated chaplains/ministers in the primary, state-maintained sector, the independent, secondary sector and the Higher Education sector. The study focuses on how important the Methodist identity is - what it means to be involved in Methodist-based education, what Methodist schools stand for and what, if anything, is different about Methodist schools.

A key finding is that parents do not choose the school for being Methodist. In cases where the religious foundation of a school is important to parents, it is the school's *Christian* identity rather than its Methodist character that matters. This is true for the majority of teaching staff also. Retrospectively, after becoming involved in the school, however, its Methodist character is viewed as an additional benefit, in part, because Methodism is seen as 'calm', 'informal' and 'inclusive'. Being a Christian school and possessing these features is one of the reasons that families from other faith backgrounds choose the Methodist school.

Parents, in the main, choose the school for its good reputation and tend to associate good reputation with a church school. Its church school identity is a major reason why parents, in particular, in the primary state sector choose the Methodist school. The term 'good reputation' encompasses academic achievements, discipline, the teaching of morals and values, response to children's individual learning and emotional needs, expectations of good behaviour and being kind to others, and a caring environment. These features contribute to the overall ethos of schools, but

questions remain unanswered as to whether they are distinctively Methodist or whether they are also characteristics of schools that are non-religious or non-Methodist. Indeed, Methodist schools are largely seen as being no different to other Christian schools.

Pastoral care, in particular, is viewed as one of the most important features of Methodist schools. It is the chaplains and ministers who are directly associated with pastoral care. The presence and work of chaplains and ministers is seen as being central to the way in which the school functions; they are highly valued across all groups of participants - not only for providing pastoral care and for the spiritual aspect of the school, but also for their energy, enthusiasm and involvement in the school as a whole.

The study yielded a mix of responses about whether the school's Methodist identity should be more prominent. One viewpoint is that a stronger Methodist brand would put families off choosing the school - they appreciate its "less strict" and "all inclusive" approach. It is widely believed that a more pronounced Methodist identity would contradict everything Methodism stands for. But another viewpoint is that the Methodist brand should be stronger in schools not least because of its historic link to education. It should establish a clearer identity - having a Methodist foundation is something to be celebrated and shared.

From a branding perspective, the findings of this study overall highlight that 'Methodist' is not a strong brand within the context of Methodist education. Schools have a strong and positive brand but it is not Methodism; the brand is embedded in the *Christian* identity of schools. The Christian foundation of schools is, without doubt, highly valued. Whilst Methodist schools may not have a clear, identifiable brand, the positive attributes of schools - both tangible and intangible - show potential to build a more visible Methodist school brand.

1. Introduction

There is a range of church schools across England and Wales with different denominational foundations. Many schools were founded from the reign of Elizabeth I onwards; schools for the working classes were mainly founded by the churches in the 19th century, generally in village locations and in long established inner city areas. These church schools formed the large majority of the schools until the Forster Act of 1870 created school boards which opened schools paid for by local rates, thus the "Dual System" was created. Despite the many changes in the education service since 1870, church schools have continued to occupy an important position within the education system.¹

Methodist schools have a long tradition within the UK educational sector in both state-maintained primary schools and independent schools. Methodism was a movement that arose out of the Church of England, led by preacher John Wesley in the 18th century. Education has always been an important aspect of Methodism. For Jabez Bunting, one of the leading voices in Methodism:

*'Education...without religion is not education. I think that a[n] education which looks only at the secular interests of an individual, which looks only at his condition as a member of civil society, and does not look on him as a man having an immortal soul... is not education'*²

The first Methodist independent school was founded in 1748, and the first Methodist day school in the early 19th century. Today there are 64 Methodist primary state-maintained schools and 14 independent schools.³

The Education office of the Methodist Church commissioned the School of Business and Social Sciences, Southlands College, Roehampton University, to carry out an

¹ Lankshear, D.W. (1994) p 15, *A Shared Vision: Education in Church Schools*, London: Church House Publishing

² Bunting, J. in Best, G.M. *Shared Aims: A celebration of Methodism's involvement in education to mark the centenary of the Methodist Board of Management and the tercentenary of John Wesley's birth*

³ <http://www.methodisteducation.co.uk/course/view>

independent study investigating the brand 'Methodist' within Methodist based education. A brand is a set of attributes by which a particular product or service may be identified. It may be considered "a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer".⁴

A brand comprises four key elements: attributes (tangible and intangible); benefits; values and personality.⁵ The distinctive factors within the four elements are what make a brand stand out amongst other, similar brands. In other words, every brand is unique:

'A brand is a product, service or organisation made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values'⁶

The overall objective of this study is to examine the impact of branding an educational institution 'Methodist' amongst students, parents of current students, staff, governors, and associated chaplains/ministers in the primary, state-maintained sector, the independent, secondary sector and the Higher Education sector, namely Southlands College. The study sets out to establish how significant a part Methodist plays in people's perceptions of Methodist schools, and whether their perceptions are essentially positive or negative. In so doing, the study investigates what it means to be involved in Methodist-based education, what Methodist schools stand for and what, if anything, is different about Methodist schools.

⁴ Bates, C. <http://www.sideroad.com/Branding>

⁵ Brassington and Pettitt (2007) *Essentials of Marketing* 2nd Edition Prentice Hall

⁶ Hankinson, G and Cowking, P. (1993) *Branding in Action: Cases and Strategies for Profitable Brand Management*. McGraw-Hill

2. Profile of schools with a Methodist foundation

There are in total 78 Methodist schools in Great Britain. These schools admit children from no faith background as well as children from Christian and other faith backgrounds. Across all schools only the minority of families are practising Christians; very few are Methodists.

Primary state-maintained schools:

Some schools have remained solely Methodist and many are a result of ecumenical partnerships. Schools vary in size from small rural schools with fewer than 50 pupils, to large city-centre schools. All Methodist primary state-maintained schools serve the local community and have a strong Christian ethos. Schools are supported by local circuits and churches through the appointment of Methodist Foundation Governors, ministers with pastoral charge, volunteer classroom assistants, and fund raising. Methodist primary state-maintained schools are either Voluntary-aided (VA) or Voluntary-controlled (VC).

Voluntary-aided schools

- VA schools have the strongest Methodist influence.
- Anyone can apply for a place
- The governing body employs staff and sets the admission criteria
- Approach to teaching religious education is in accordance with the trust deed
- Buildings and land are usually owned by the faith organisation
- The governing body contributes to building and maintenance costs.

Voluntary-controlled schools

- Anyone can apply for a place
- VC schools are run by the local authority;
- The local authority employs staff and sets admission criteria
- Approach to teaching religious education is in accordance with the LEA's local Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) syllabus
- Buildings and land are usually owned by the faith organisation
- The faith organisation also appoints some of the members of the governing body.

Independent schools:

Most of the fourteen Methodist independent schools in England were founded in the 19th century. The aim was to provide an independent education in an environment with a strong Christian ethos. The first two schools were intended for the children of Methodist ministers. Schools are both single-sex and co-ed, take day pupils and boarders, and take pupils from aged four to eighteen years old.

3. Research method

This report presents findings from the research carried out from September 2007 to September 2008 on schools with a Methodist foundation across England. This is a qualitative study comprising semi-structured interviews and focus groups with schools staff, chaplains and ministers, governors and parents. The research was designed to provide an initial steer on the impact of branding an educational institution "Methodist" in primary, state-maintained, Methodist schools, independent secondary Methodist schools, and Southlands College, Roehampton University, which has a Methodist foundation. Schools for the study were selected by the Methodist Steering Group on the basis of specific characteristics in order to ensure a relatively balanced representation.

The sample comprised a total of eleven Methodist schools - including pilot schools - from across the independent sector and the primary state-maintained sector, and Southlands College. Within the independent sector five schools were selected allowing for some representation of geographical location; of day and boarding schools; and of schools with and without local competition. Within the primary state-maintained sector six schools were selected allowing for some representation of geographical location; of Methodist/Methodist-Anglican schools; and of VA and VC schools.

The eleven selected schools were initially contacted by the steering group and invited to take part in the study. Subsequently the Social Research Centre (SRC) made follow-up telephone calls and emails introducing the study, outlining what would be required in taking part and arranging for the researchers to carry out interviews and focus groups in schools. For their reference the research proposal for the study was forwarded to each participating school.

Although there was some overlap, interview and focus group questions were individually designed for each category of participants: Headteachers, teaching staff, governors, chaplains/ministers, parents and pupils. Schedules for interviews and focus groups were structured around the research objectives and the questions laid out in the Methodist branding research proposal. A pilot study comprised one independent school and two primary state-maintained schools. Findings and

methodology were reviewed and alterations to interview schedules were not required, therefore findings from the pilot study are included in the overall project.

Two researchers carried out visits to schools between November 2007 and June 2008. In each primary state-maintained school, interviews and focus groups were completed in one day. In one independent school that was relatively local to Roehampton University, the visit was also completed in one day. In four independent schools, where more travelling was involved, the research was spread over a period of two days.

In each school, individual interviews took place with the Head, chaplain/minister and at least one school governor. Focus groups were conducted with teaching staff and with parents. In each independent school a third focus group took place with pupils from year ten upwards. In two primary state-maintained schools a third focus group took place with children from the school council. Focus groups comprised between five and twelve participants; participants were selected by schools. In Southlands College interviews were carried out with senior management, teaching staff and the chaplain. A focus group was conducted with seven Southlands students in their first, second and third years of study.

Handwritten notes were taken during interviews and focus groups and, where permissible, voice recordings also. Analyses of interviews and focus groups were carried out through a process of coding data into categories by theme.

4. Results

This study looks at Methodist schools from two sectors: primary state-maintained and independent. Despite the fundamental differences between these sectors, much of the data yielded from the same questions are comparable. Likewise, data from Southlands College participants are comparable to schools. But some responses do vary by school sector, and these differences are highlighted accordingly. Variations in data that we might have expected to come across amongst primary state-maintained schools depending on their VA or VC status, however, are not so apparent. Where VA and VC schools do differ, this tends, instead, to be related to the socioeconomic factors of the areas in which the schools are located. There are no meaningful differences in participants' perceptions between Methodist and Methodist-Anglican schools.

The following sections present our research findings. Firstly we look at the ways in which Methodism is visible in schools. We then investigate the sorts of things that teachers and parents were looking for in a school and whether its Methodist character had any bearing on their decision-making. This leads on to parents' subsequent views of the Methodist school, and what 'Methodism' means amongst different groups of participants. We go on to look at the characteristics of Methodist schools and the types of features that are valued, and then consider what Methodist education stands for - what, if anything, it offers that is different to other schools. Finally we examine participants' views on whether the Methodist identity of schools should be made more prominent.

4.1 How visible is Methodism in schools?

The Christian character of schools is visible in different ways. Most visually evident in the majority of schools in our sample, is the presence of a chapel or church - if not on the same grounds as the school then nearby. Schools use chapels/churches to varying extents. School chapels in independent schools tend to be used more frequently, for example, for assemblies, though often whole-school assemblies may take place in a larger venue due to the high number of pupils attending. School chapels are also used across learning in other ways, for example for music and

drama activities. Across both school sectors pupils attend the chapel or local church for assemblies, special services, worship and special Christian festivals. For many schools, badges on pupils' blazers symbolise the Christian character of the school.

The visibility of Methodism in schools varies quite widely. For some it is part of the name or logo - name-boards outside display the Methodist identity of the school, either by 'Methodist' forming part of the school's name or by being present within the wider description of the school. The Methodist identity of other schools is considerably less visible.

School reception areas display symbols of Christianity and, specifically, Methodism both to view and to touch; this is particularly the case in primary state-maintained schools. Symbols often include pictures and other wall hangings, crafts pupils have made, information about activities the school has been involved in, news and forthcoming events, the school's mission statement, historical information about John Wesley, and Wesleyan artefacts. Wesley is a prominent feature of learning across both school sectors, for example, acknowledged during assemblies and worship, and schools' celebration of Wesley Founders Day.

School prospectuses and websites display the Methodist identity of schools, albeit to varying levels of prominence. When prospective parents visit schools for the first time, Heads emphasise the Christian ethos of the school and specifically that the school has a Methodist foundation.

4.2 What were people looking for in a school?

We aimed to establish if the Methodist identity had any bearing on parents' decisions to bring their children to the school and on teachers applying for a post. What sorts of things about a school are important to parents and teachers? Were parents aware of the school's Methodist identity before choosing it? How much of a factor was it in their decision-making?

Questions asked of teachers about what was important to them when looking for a teaching post generated mixed responses. Most teachers had not applied to teach at the school solely because it was a church school, although in many cases this was a contributory factor. For only the minority of teachers, being a church school was one

of the most important aspects - and these were teachers who were described themselves as practising Christians. But a noteworthy finding was that, where being a church school mattered, it was the Christian identity generally of the school rather than its *Methodist* character that had influenced decisions taken to teach there. There were many other considerations for teaching at the school, including locality and reputation. But most frequently expressed by teachers was the school's ethos - the caring, welcoming, friendly atmosphere that had been the most salient and appealing feature.

"It [the school] immediately felt right, it was the atmosphere, the ethos"

It was difficult for teachers to be certain of whether the Christian character of the school is what underpins the school's ethos or whether other features, for example in primary state-maintained schools, the small size of the school, or its location (village location in some cases), could be determining factors. Most, however, share the view that the school's attributes are, to some extent, linked to its Christian foundation.

"I didn't expect it to make a difference being a church school but actually I think it does, I think the children get something extra out of it, and I do too"

The vast majority, including those who believe their decision to teach in the school had not been influenced by its Christian foundation, reflect that this aspect of its identity is a valuable asset; being a church school is beneficial to the children, and has enhanced their own work/teaching experience.

Parents choose a school for a number of reasons and, across both sectors, their children's happiness and being cared for in school is of highest concern. One parent was keen to point out,

"As a parent the most important thing is it's a caring school - not that it's a church school, but you expect caring in a church school"

Parents reported, on the whole, being aware of the school's Methodist foundation before choosing it although in the vast majority of cases, like teachers, this was not an influential factor in their decision-making.

We see once again that in cases where the religious foundation of a school is important, it is the school's *Christian* foundation rather than its Methodist character that matters to parents. Responses from parents about the importance of the school having a Christian foundation varied somewhat between the state-maintained and independent sectors.

For the majority of state school parents who took part in the study, being a church school had been an important part in their choice of school whether or not they considered themselves religious. Parents report that this is because of the 'good reputation' church schools have, a point we return to below.

"We knew it had a good reputation, we knew other children who have come here and done well and been really happy"

Many parents consider themselves fortunate if the Methodist school is the only local or nearest school and therefore a natural choice. Other parents who live in areas where they have more than one choice of school favour the Methodist school over others, again, because of its 'good reputation'.

"We could have chosen another local school - in fact one nearer to where we live, but we wanted this one and we were lucky enough to get our daughter in here"

While Methodist state schools serve the local community, 'local' in some schools includes families from further afield than the immediate vicinity. This is especially the case in village locations and in areas where the demographic makeup is predominately white and middleclass.

"All the children from the village come here, but so too do children from neighbouring villages because parents would rather bring their children to a church school"

In other state schools, especially those located in less affluent areas, being local or 'on the doorstep' and therefore convenient, is the main reason parents send their children to the school. It was pointed out by Heads of schools that the fact that it is a church school is not important to many of these parents:

“For some of our parents it’s a case of being the nearest school, they can walk here, or the children can bring themselves to school...”

“It’s of no consequence to some parents that it’s a church school, it’s being the nearest school that matters”

The school’s good reputation was the most frequently given reason for choosing it across both the state and independent sectors. For parents and for teaching staff, good reputation encompasses a variety of qualities, not only academic achievements but also discipline, the teaching of morals and values, response to children’s individual learning and emotional needs, expectations of good behaviour and being kind to others, and a caring environment in which children’s wellbeing is at the fore. Questions were raised about what part the Christian foundation of the school might play in these qualities that make up its good reputation. For some parents of children in the state sector, the terms ‘good reputation’ and ‘church school’ co-exist - a church school has a good reputation because of the qualities mentioned above that it possesses. Parents stressed though, that this is not to say non-church schools cannot and do not have a good reputation, but the Methodist church school for many parents offers something ‘different’. Other primary state-maintained school parents feel that while the church identity is important to the school’s good reputation, other characteristics may also play a part, such as the small size of the school, its location, and the quality of staff.

Being a church school is, on the whole, less important to parents of children in the independent sector than to state school parents. The Christian foundation of the school is, for independent school parents, nonetheless valued and considered an added bonus. This was especially the case for parents who described themselves as practising Christians. But overall it is the school’s independent status which was the top priority for most parents when choosing a school - not that it has a church foundation. As mentioned above, having a good reputation and all that this encompasses is of high importance to parents. Linked to the school’s good reputation is the belief that independent schools can offer more in the way of facilities and opportunities for children - more effectively meeting individual needs - than state schools.

“It doesn’t matter if your child isn’t hugely academic, they’re encouraged in what they’re good at and interested in - whether it’s music, sports, drama...”

Academic achievement is important to parents but their child's emotional wellbeing and reaching their full potential are of highest concern.

Questions were raised about the competition between the Methodist school and other independent schools that parents might have considered. If independent schools in general provide more in the way of facilities and opportunities for children, had parents considered other independent schools as well as the Methodist one? Why had they chosen the Methodist school? The vast majority of parents reported having considered a range of options available to them. For some, cost was a factor - fees at the Methodist school were more affordable than other independent schools they had looked at. Another aspect was that other independent schools place high emphasis on academic results which, for some parents, would not be appropriate for their child who would struggle in such an academically driven environment. It was the case for some parents that the Methodist school had been an 'insurance option'. That is, their child had not passed exams to secure a place at more prestigious or academic independent/selective schools, and the Methodist school was a safety net alternative to the school of their first choice. But parents who took this position were keen to emphasise how happy their child was at the Methodist school - that it had been 'the right choice'. However, for those parents for whom the Methodist school had been their first choice, there was some resentment that the school had the 'insurance option' reputation, the implication being that their child could not have been offered a place at a more esteemed school.

In some cases, the school had been used by previous generations in families, so there was an emotional or nostalgic attachment. Recommendation was also a factor - many parents knew of other children who had attended the school and been happy and achieved well. But parents were keen to stress that they had felt the Methodist school was 'different' to other independent schools, or 'had something extra', a point we investigate further below. Somewhat linked to the 'different' aspect of the school, though, was the belief of some parents that their child's individual educational and/or emotional needs would be more effectively met.

4.3 How do parents feel, in hindsight, about their choice of school?

Having gained some sense of parents' feelings about the Methodist school that had affected their decision in choosing it for their child, parents across both sectors were then encouraged to speak about how they perceive the school now, given their and their children's first hand experience. The vast majority of parents who took part in all focus groups reported how satisfied they were with the school in a number of ways. The features they had spoken about which, for them, make up the school's good reputation were referred back to, including discipline, teaching morals and values, caring environment, meeting individual needs, expectations of good behaviour and being kind to others. Parents described the school in terms of its "family centred approach", "cascading help", and "its holistic approach towards my child's education".

The most frequent comment was how happy their child was at the school; their child's happiness was clearly of utmost importance to parents. But there was uncertainty over whether their child's happiness at the school was a direct result of it being a church school. For parents of independent school children, the question was raised of how much the school's independent status is accountable for their child's happiness. In other words, is it about being a church school or being an independent school? Overall parents considered it was 'probably both'. But parents from across both sectors tended to raise the same points about the school's Christian ethos which, for them, played at least some part in their child's 'happy school' experience.

Parents reflected on the positive role they believe the Christian character of the school plays in the overall school environment. Those for whom initially the Christian foundation had been of little importance spoke about the benefits they subsequently believe the religious foundation of the school provides:

"the school makes children aware of others and *their* needs and problems"

"they're so well looked after here - my daughter who has special needs is taken great care of, not just by teachers but other children are so kind towards her - I'm not sure it would've been like that in another school"

Parents also commented specifically on the Methodist character of the school; it appears they associate and value the 'softer' approach of Methodism.

“there’s a gentle emphasis on religion here, and a strong emphasis on caring”

“we’ve realised that the school being Methodist is an added benefit - it’s not overtly religious...”

“...it’s not in your face kind of thing like some church schools are”.

4.4 Characteristics of a Methodist school: What does Methodist mean? What do people value about Methodist schools?

Traditionally the Methodist church is associated with being a more liberal church relative to other Christian denominations. A national study of Methodist congregations carried out by Southlands College in 2005 found that the Methodist church is outward-looking, community minded, inclusive and non-hierarchical. Methodist congregation members place importance on openness to diversity, social justice, tolerance, pastoral care and involvement in voluntary activities.

It seems that similar perceptions of Methodism are visible and valued in schools. Participants across all groups were asked what ‘Methodist’ means to them. Some participants expressed uncertainty about what it stands for, what it means. Many spoke about Methodist in terms of being a Christian denomination “but more easy-going”, “grounded”, “sensible”, “calm”. But many participants tended to describe Methodism in the context of the same characteristics as those found in the national study. This was especially the case for school staff, governors and chaplains and ministers. Methodism was widely viewed as “doing formal things informally”, and “less formal... while still preaching core Christian values”. Many parents and pupils referred to the ‘inclusiveness’ of Methodism. Other types of associations - some complete opposites - were also expressed including Methodists being teetotal, old, young, formal, informal, vibrant, dull, and hymn-singing.

It was important to try and discover in greater depth during the study the ways in which Methodist schools might be perceived as being different to other types of schools. What are the ‘different’ and ‘extra’ things about Methodist schools that are valued - how can they be explained? We were interested in hearing the views of

people with different types of involvement across both sectors of Methodist schools, and seeing how their views might vary.

However, there were no meaningful differences between the perspectives of different groups of participants. Some features of Methodist schools that were considered 'different' or 'extra' were more tangible than others, for example the chapel/church on or near school premises. The chapel or church has a visual and a spiritual presence which is highly valued.

"It's wonderful having a chapel, it gives meaning, show of belief, that extra comfort, care..."

Many parents and school staff talked about the chapel or church as a key representation of the school's Christian identity and the atmosphere that it creates - "spiritual", "serene", "calmness", "togetherness", "community feel". Participants tend to place considerable value on the activities that take place in the chapel or church - acts of worship, special services and the celebration of religious festivals. But the meaningfulness of the school chapel to pupils often continues long after they have left the school. Many former independent school pupils return to the school chapel to be married.

It was difficult often for participants to say what makes a Methodist school different to any other. The point was stressed, most often by Heads, governors and chaplains, that Methodist schools are no different to other Christian schools. From both school sectors and across all groups, participants tended to describe the features of their school that make up its identity in response to the questions laid out above. References were frequently made to the general ethos of the school. Many characteristics were repeatedly identified to describe the Methodist school ethos:

- Friendliness, welcoming, family atmosphere
- Teaching of Christian values
- Pastoral care
- Inclusiveness and openness to diversity
- Loving, caring, tolerance
- Being kind and thoughtful
- Showing understanding towards others

- Teaching and caring for children in response to their individual learning and emotional needs
- Discipline - “children are well behaved”

While participants emphasise the positive ethos of schools, their perceptions raise further questions about whether these qualities are distinctively Methodist or whether they are also characteristics of other schools that are non-Methodist or non-denominational; as noted above it was widely believed Methodist schools are no different to other Christian schools. There were no overall clear answers, though, partly because many participants had little experience of other schools with which to draw comparisons. There was also some concern over not wanting to discriminate against other schools by suggesting that only church schools possess these qualities. It was pointed out that these are also features of many non-church schools. One school staff member explained that it is not necessarily simply a matter of the ‘Methodist code’, rather the ‘human code’, which, in her experience, had also been evident in non-church schools. Other participants felt that these qualities were at least partly due to being a church - though not Methodist - school and referred back to the less tangible features of the Methodist school when expressing the value of its Christian foundation.

The most recurring theme that emerged from focus group data were references made to the pastoral care in schools. Pastoral care was repeatedly emphasised by participants across all groups as being a prominent and valued feature, considered a crucial aspect to children’s happiness and overall wellbeing.

“it’s one of the most important things about the school. I know that if my child has any difficulties or problems of any kind there’s always help and support here for her”

“nothing’s too much trouble here, people put themselves out - they want to help and care in any way they can”

It seems that pastoral care is extended to all people involved in the school, though, not just its pupils. Both staff and parents feel cared for and spoke appreciatively of the kindness and support that is simply there for anyone who needs it.

It is the chaplains and ministers who are directly linked with the pastoral care in schools. Their presence and work overall is seen as being central to the way in which the school functions, and is highly valued across all groups. Heads, for example, spoke of the support they receive from the school chaplain or minister; other staff and parents also expressed their appreciation for having a chaplain or minister connected to the school, many offering personal narratives of occasions when they have turned to them in times of need and received unending support. Pupils from independent schools who took part in focus groups were keen to express appreciation for the care and support available to them in their respective schools and, without exception, each group spoke of the benefits of having a chaplain attached to the school. Some comments made by pupils from independent schools included:

“It’s great having a chaplain here - you know there’s always someone you can turn to if you need to.”

“He’s really helped loads of us with problems we’ve had - and it doesn’t matter if your problems are school or home or personal ones, you can speak to him about anything knowing that he’ll help and support you”

“He’s so cool! So much fun, you know, not stuffy like you’d think they might be. He gets involved with all sorts of things in school, not just into prayers and all that sort of stuff”

Chaplains and ministers are highly valued by pupils, parents and school staff not only for providing pastoral care and for the spiritual aspect of the school, but also for their energy, enthusiasm and involvement in the school as a whole - in essence all that their role encompasses, a feature we return to below. Teaching staff, too, are viewed overall by parents, pupils, Heads, governors, chaplains and ministers as providing a level of care that reaches beyond the expectations of their teaching roles. Such care and support for pupils tended to be linked back to the caring ethos of schools.

Providing pastoral care and support to the whole school was considered by chaplains and ministers as one of their key roles, and was pointed out as “distinctive about Methodism hopefully”. But their role in the school encompasses a range of responsibilities including:

- Being a visible “church presence on site”
- “Showing and teaching everyone in the school the importance and value of the Christian faith”
- “To preserve and promote the spiritual foundation of the school”
- Taking religious worship/services/assemblies
- Preaching in local churches
- Charity and committee work
- Supporting school Heads - listening and sharing ideas
- Peer mentoring
- Counselling
- Teaching

Chaplains and ministers view building and sustaining links between the school and the local church, and between the school and the wider community, a very important part of their work. Links between the school and church can be varied and include the school using the church for festivals and special school services; functions/interest groups held on church premises for families; and in state primary schools, congregation members going into schools giving extra help with reading, crafts and other activities. Schools’ links with the wider community include, for example, carol singing in care homes for the elderly; staging local music and drama events; and involvement in activities to support/fundraise for local charities, and for global projects through World AIMS.⁷

4.5 What does a Methodist education stand for? What, if anything, do Methodist schools offer that non-church schools do not?

The study sought the views, in particular, of school staff, chaplains, ministers and governors to consider what a Methodist education means and what ‘added’ benefits it might provide. As before, participants referred back to the qualities used to describe the Methodist school ethos and spoke about the Methodist church as having “liberal roots”, “a social focus”, “inclusive theology” and that Methodism “seeks to be all-embracing - flexible, open and accepting”. It was repeatedly emphasised that the

⁷ World AIMS provides advice, support and resources for schools with a Methodist foundation. It exists to support schools in developing a whole school approach towards global citizenship at curricular, extra-curricular and policy levels (The Methodist Church World AIMS Project, <http://www.methodisteducation.co.uk/course/view>).

school was first and foremost a Christian school with Christian values and ethos. There was some difficulty expressing what is different specifically about Methodist schools, but participants offered views on what they perceive is different about a church school. These include:

- Assemblies, collective worship, special festivals
- Christian curriculum
- Qualitatively different from a county school - a caring that is underpinned by faith
- Support in crucial, difficult moments through care and prayer
- Singing Christian hymns and songs
- Christian teaching, though not forced

Speaking about Christian teaching, one chaplain pointed out that the original purpose of the school was “not to educate Christians, but to give a Christian education to all” or, in essence, “to promote the Christian faith”. The spiritual aspect was cited as one of the key differences between the Methodist church school and a non-denominational school. It is the view of the chaplain who emphasised this point that “education is not complete without a spiritual dimension”. Other staff members stressed that children’s learning within a Christian environment is an important part of their education. However, neither the academic nor the spiritual aspects of a school, singly, is believed to be the most vital part of a child’s education. It is the whole package - a holistic approach of a Methodist school that takes into account the emotional, spiritual and academic elements of teaching and learning - that is important. This was a view echoed by many participants across the study. Speaking about the school’s commitment to supporting individual children’s emotional and/or learning needs, and discovering and building on their strengths, one governor stressed:

“every child is gifted and talented and we are concerned with helping them discover and reach their potential - in whatever direction that might be”

The ‘holistic approach’ also takes into account the child’s family. One Head summed up the views of many by emphasising the importance of involving and caring for whole families within the school. Through having close links with parents and an understanding of their home life, for example, each child’s individual needs and potential can be better reached. Another view expressed was that non-church

primary state schools can be preoccupied with results/statistics through which children are seen as 'performers', whereas "a church school will find the uniqueness about a child".

Heads, governors, teaching staff, chaplains and ministers were asked about the school's 'added value' - what they hoped pupils would take with them from having attended the Methodist school. Responses were consistent, that pupils would:

"...reach their maximum potential in whatever that might be"

"...turn out good citizens"

"...be confident and live by Christian values"

"...care about others and about the world"

4.6 Should the Methodist identity of schools be more prominent?

Participants offered - or were asked - their views on whether the Methodist brand should be made more of in schools. How strong or weak is the Methodist brand? Would a more pronounced Methodist identity to schools be a good thing? How does the strength of the Methodist brand and its impact compare with other denominational church schools, for example, Catholic schools?

These questions yielded a mix of responses - many of which were complex - and again, from a cross-section of groups. However, it was the case that most participants tended to be against their school adopting a stronger Methodist identity for reasons we return to below. This was especially the view of Heads, governors, teachers, chaplains and ministers. Many participants, especially parents, were uncertain of what might be involved in creating 'a stronger Methodist identity' and asked questions of their own, including "how would the school be made more Methodist?" and "is this something that is likely to happen?"

Participants reflected on their perceptions of other church schools, both in the local area and/or in general, and the strength of their identity as a comparison to the Methodist school. Most frequently referred to were Catholic schools. Many participants spoke about the high levels of 'strictness' in schools in terms of expectations placed on whole families to actively practice the Catholic religion. Not to do so would invariably mean children would not be offered a place in the school.

Christian religious practises are at the forefront of education in the Catholic school. Views towards the ways in which Catholic schools are perceived to operate were both positive and negative. Some participants spoke in an optimistic way about 'the discipline' and general approach of the Catholic school. Others felt that such a rigorous system was not a positive aspect of the Catholic school's identity - that it operated on an exclusive, even divisive, basis. These participants pointed out that, on the contrary, the Methodist school was not so 'strict' and was instead more inclusive. One parent spoke appreciatively of their child's school, stating:

"this school isn't selective - any child can come here, they don't have to be Methodist or even Christian"

Some participants were uncertain as to whether a stronger Methodist brand would be a positive or a negative feature for schools; for many of these participants a stronger Methodist identity could have both positive and negative consequences rather than being simply a case of one or the other. Several school staff members, particularly Heads, stressed the need to be cautious about making their school more obviously Methodist in case such action would deter families using the school and/or have an adverse affect on their attitudes towards the Christian faith. But some considered that there was possibly some scope to manage this - the difficulty would be getting the right balance. The question, then, of what people understand by 'Methodist' was often raised when contemplating how current and future families might react to a stronger Methodist influence in schools.

Other participants had clearer views on the matter. Many concerns were expressed over schools adopting a stronger Methodist identity. One perspective was that making the Methodist identity more prominent would put families off choosing the school. A range of reasons why this could happen were explored. Some Heads - in particular from primary state-maintained schools - stressed the importance of the all-inclusive nature of their school, in particular, reflecting the culturally diverse area of families from different faith backgrounds. The school should, and currently does, serve all parts of the local community, but taking on a more pronounced Methodist identity might alienate local ethnic minority families. It might also raise concerns amongst local families in general who (a) do not choose the school for its Christian foundation; or (b) value the school's church foundation but also appreciate its "less strict" and "all inclusive" approach.

For many schools, though, it appears that ethnic minority families often favour the Methodist school over others *because* – and not in spite - of its Christian foundation. No ethnic minority parents took part in the study but school staff members gave some helpful feedback that they had come across about the reasons ethnic minority parents choose the Methodist school. For some parents, unsurprisingly, it is the most local school to where they live, but others actively choose the school over other non-church schools. One Headteacher pointed out:

“the reason parents [from other faith backgrounds] choose this school is because they value the Christian ethos - they’d rather send their children to a church school than a non-faith school”

It seems that parents from other faith backgrounds also value the family atmosphere, the pastoral care, and the inclusiveness that participants throughout the study tend to associate with Methodist schools. Other staff members emphasised:

“We have more Muslim children coming to the school now - they [parents] recognise the shared values and the rigour in getting across those values. They recognise the caring discipline”

“ [ethnic minority] parents believe that it’s better for their children to be educated within a Christian school - they like the caring environment, the discipline, the respect and the actual practising of a religion - it doesn’t matter that it’s not their own religion”

“Muslims value the school’s ethos, they are mixing in the community and getting a strong moral education for their children - faith rubber stamps morality”

Strong feelings were expressed by a cross section of participants who stressed that if schools were made ‘more Methodist’ they would appear exclusive, which contradicts everything Methodist stands for. One participant spoke passionately about her views on this:

“More strongly Methodist could be divisive. I would find it a bit distasteful - it would be a shame, it would spoil what we have if conditions were put in place, more dogmatic”

Another participant profoundly summed up:

“The Methodist brand is weak, but that, in itself, is its strength”

Fewer participants believed that, without doubt, a more prominent Methodist identity to schools would be a positive thing. Interestingly it was not the case that the majority of Christian participants, including chaplains/ministers, shared this view. But participants who were in favour of a stronger Methodist identity were mostly those who considered themselves Christians, and in some cases, Methodists. It was emphasised that Methodism should be proud of what it stands for and not apologetic; it has achieved much, and should be a more obvious presence in schools. One participant felt strongly:

“yes, it’s [the school’s] got the title ‘Methodist’ so it should emphasise it more. It’s a good thing, a positive thing”

References were made to other denominational schools as a means of supporting this point:

“Catholics are clearer about what they’re doing. Methodism should redefine itself regarding its Methodist identity”

It was also stressed that the Methodist identity should be made more of...

“...because Methodism sits comfortably with education”.

The Methodist church should use its attributes proudly in a way that shows...

“We are Methodist therefore we are broad and inclusive”.

It was pointed out that another reason a more prominent Methodist identity would be of benefit is that while parents are aware the school is a Christian school with a Methodist foundation, many do not understand what exactly Methodist is - what it stands for.

5. Branding and Methodist schools

From a branding perspective, the findings of this study overall highlight that 'Methodist' does not have a strong brand within the context of Methodist education. Methodist schools have a strong and positive brand but it is not Methodism. The Methodist school brand is about being a *church* school. The Christian foundation to schools is, without doubt, highly valued.

There are many areas throughout the study where a clear Methodist school brand is not apparent. For example, the general difficulty in establishing a common definition of what Methodist education is. Participants emphasise the qualities they value in the Methodist school including for example pastoral care, inclusiveness and family atmosphere. But there was some difficulty in teasing out the individual, identifiable factors that can explain these qualities, that is, what is due to the school having a Methodist character, and what is due to other factors such as being independent, small in size, located in a village, and so on. There is some ambiguity over (a) what Methodism is, (b) what Methodist education is, and (c) whether and how Methodist schools are different to other schools, either church or non-religious.

By identifying the attributes of the Methodist school it is possible to see how people involved in the schools perceive the brand. The different, identified characteristics of Methodist schools can be seen as functional attributes (tangible) and symbolic attributes (intangible).

Functional attributes

- Chapel/church
- Assemblies, collective worship, special festivals
- Literature and signage
- Pictures, and information on activities and special events
- Websites

The presence, especially, of the chapel/church and the chaplain or minister are valued by parents, pupils and staff and are visibly what makes a church school stand

out as different. Religious assemblies and worship reinforce the school's church school status and are also meaningful to people, including those who do not consider themselves religious. The functional attributes are very positive for the brand and should be maintained, if not improved upon. Each of these attributes provides an opportunity for the themes of Methodism to be communicated and, moreover, for the Methodist brand to be developed.

The symbolic attributes are highly valued by parents and staff. Frequently, many symbolic attributes are recognised after people have become involved in the school.

Symbolic attributes

- Pastoral care
- Inclusiveness and openness
- Loving, caring, understanding and tolerance
- Kindness, thoughtfulness and sharing
- Family atmosphere

There are many commonalities amongst symbolic attributes that people involved in Methodist schools identify, but these are not distinctive within the educational market that makes the Methodist brand stand out. Based on participants' responses it appears that these attributes are church school attributes and not Methodist-specific.

As noted above, chaplains and ministers and the physical presence of the chapel or church on or near school premises play an important role in schools. Participants place considerable value on these features of Methodist schools. This gives a positive dynamic to the overall brand. A need, however, to understand that all parties within the organisation make up the brand identity is critical. Staff (teaching and non-teaching), students and parents all contribute in some way, and to varying extents, to the brand.

Overall the brand appears to have potential in macro-marketing terms, that is, there are opportunities to develop a stronger brand through the schools' tangible and intangible attributes. The caring theme, in particular, appears to be consistent to the overall perception of Methodist schools and could be built upon. The liberal approach of Methodism is also a consistent theme. This liberal approach is compared to Catholic and Church of England educational institutions. The findings suggest that these sections of Christian education have developed a strong brand

perception. But this does not appeal to the majority of participants in our sample because beliefs are that a more prominent Methodist identity might discourage people from choosing the school. The Catholic and Church of England brand of education, however, is a positive example of strong identity, strong personality and hence a strong brand.

Recommendations

It is proposed that three recommendation options be put forward.

Recommendation option 1

Maintain the status quo, but commence a re-launch of the current brand message

Recommendation option 2

Total overhaul of the Methodist educational brand. Creating a unified message, which will in turn, create a strong, recognisable and unique brand, both externally and internally.

Recommendation option 3

Further research, to reinforce the findings of this research project.

At a minimum it is suggested that all parties who are involved in the brand need to be guided in their understanding of the meaning of a brand and how a brand works. Realisation that they are a part of the brand, whether they like it or not, is key to bringing the Methodist educational brand to the new level.