**The context for evangelism - online or in person? A discourse analysis of young people’s perspectives about God and faith**

**Abstract**

At a time when children and young people are eminently engaged in the online world, it is key to investigate their perceptions and understandings in order to establish the context for evangelism amongst them. This phenomenological study gathered data using focus group discussions with 51 young people aged seven to sixteen years old. Discourse analysis illuminated some key areas of focus for evangelistic strategies to be more informed and hence more effective.

**Keywords**

Hybrid ministry, evangelism, online, young people, children

**1 Introduction**

Due to reduced engagement of younger generations with church,[[1]](#footnote-1) and significant online activity of children and young people,[[2]](#footnote-2) Scripture Union[[3]](#footnote-3) (a UK and international mission organisation) were keen to explore enhanced possibilities of evangelism within the online arena. They therefore entered a partnership with Liverpool Hope University to research this area. Hybrid interactions were of interest; whereby young people simultaneously engage with their online and physical (‘in person’) worlds (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020). This would enable some of the positive features of church involvement to be harnessed and utilised,[[4]](#footnote-4) whilst connecting with young people in the online world which they frequent so readily.[[5]](#footnote-5) Littlejohn called for more research of hybrid church, in order to develop the best ways of working within a hybrid context, particularly with regards to children and young people.[[6]](#footnote-6) This research project therefore seeks to contribute to this field of knowledge.

This article is part of a broader project exploring the feasibility and outworking of hybrid evangelistic activity. The primary aim of this phenomenological article is therefore to ask what is the context for evangelism amongst this age group, and to what extent is this online, in person or hybrid? We therefore investigated the lived experiences and perceptions of young people (aged 7 to 16 years old) across the UK from a range of socio-economic and geographical contexts. Data was collected using focus group interviews, containing participants who would not describe themselves as active Christians. The findings reveal aspects of their views about God, the people who influence them, who they would trust to tell them about faith, their existing knowledge about Christians and Christianity and online tools which they may find beneficial in their explorations. To date, this area has not yet been rigorously researched. These pioneering findings therefore serve to inform evangelism in this sector. Identifying these underlying discourses will serve to inform developing and innovative evangelistic activity, to enhance its effectiveness and efficacy.

**2 Background**

***2.1 Evangelism amongst children and young people***

Evangelism occurs when communication of the message of Jesus Christ crucified is delivered by a messenger, to a person (Marquez[[7]](#footnote-7)). Many have argued that the very essence of youthwork is evangelistic, with the aim of reaching and proselytising unchurched youth.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similarly, Dean[[9]](#footnote-9) argued that the church must help teenagers recognize that salvation has come to them, and that as a result God calls them to leave behind their egos and take on new identities as disciples, empowered for ministry through the practices of Christian faith. However, Aziz[[10]](#footnote-10) asserted that evangelical expressions of youth ministry often occur without contextual understanding and analysis of the lived realities and experiences of the youth. Similarly, William[[11]](#footnote-11) argued that the needs of the young people must be known and understood. In order to do this, Bell[[12]](#footnote-12) called for the church to build relationships, engage with their local community, be incarnational by living, working, learning, playing, and engaging in dialogue. Conversely, McFeeters et al.[[13]](#footnote-13) suggested that the purpose of Christian faith-based youth work could be viewed as existing on a continuum between social purpose and evangelism. Marquez[[14]](#footnote-14) argued that due to the world becoming more connected digitally, new approaches to communication, dialogue, and fellowship are required, including evangelism.

Evangelism in this digital world requires a review of communication strategies, to evaluate whether traditional methods are having desired results (Marquez[[15]](#footnote-15)). William[[16]](#footnote-16) argued that young people are entitled to meaningful participation in mission, on the basis of being primary recipients in the missio Dei. Similarly, Aziz[[17]](#footnote-17) emphasised the need for work amongst young people to be intentional in assisting the youth to enjoy meaningful relationships with significant adults and peers. This reflects the notion of relational ministry.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, Root[[19]](#footnote-19) cautioned that mission and ministry should not be about usingrelationships to prompt individuals to accept the gospel message, but should simply be about connecting in everyday life with no pretence or secret motive to share in their suffering and struggle and support them in being what God created them to be.

***2.2 Exploring online possibilities***

Given the aim of this article to explore the context of evangelism within online and in-person arenas, it is key to examine literature relating to online mission and ministry. Prior to the Covid, there was significant caution against the dangers of engaging in online spaces and the need to prepare young people to navigate this ‘digital Babylon’.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, there is now wide acknowledgement that the pandemic has transformed the church’s understanding of, and approach to the use of online activities.[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet much of the research has focused on the church’s work with adults and particularly with Sunday worship.[[22]](#footnote-22) But children and young people increasingly engage in the digital world, enhanced by circumstances in the pandemic but most notably also due to the rise of the mobile phone.[[23]](#footnote-23) Engagement of young people with social media and online gaming is now significant.[[24]](#footnote-24) Rivas-Lara[[25]](#footnote-25) found that a significant proportion of adolescents (33.6%) considered social media the most authentic form of media and enabled them to learn, fight for causes and develop better lifestyle choices. Many have questioned whether the online world impedes relational and community functioning, but Hunt[[26]](#footnote-26) identified a shift in thinking relating to digital engagement, observing that digital connections helped to sustain youth ministry during the pandemic, and will have longer-term implications for engagement with children and young people. Hill’s[[27]](#footnote-27) research found that social media use enhanced youth small group in-person provision, concluding that hybrid youth ministry is not only the best of both worlds but also plays a role in incarnational youth ministry.

Within online learning, marketing, and gaming, online networks play an important role in enabling young people to feel connected, although often the sense of ‘belonging’ created is of an exclusive nature.[[28]](#footnote-28) This is further observed by Hiebert and Kortes-Miller.[[29]](#footnote-29) Indeed, there are strong indications that young people engage socially online with friends they already know, rather than connecting with friends they meet online; so that social media is used as a means of communicating with friends and gaming with people who are already known.[[30]](#footnote-30) Smith et al.[[31]](#footnote-31) argue that rather than considering whether social media does or does not aid belonging, there is need for investigation into the circumstances. Peacock et al.[[32]](#footnote-32) identified three themes; interaction and engagement, culture of learning, and support which together promoted a sense of belonging for those engaged in online learning. This highlights the need to further explored empirically possibilities within the online world.

**3 Methodology**

This phenomenological research sought to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of children and young people (aged 7 to 16 years old) regarding faith, values and practices to reveal information about the contemporary context for mission and the extent to which this was online or in person. Since this project was exploring missional context, it was deemed key that the participants were not actively connected with church, so that the context of those not engaging with church could be examined. To this end, research invitations were distributed to a range of children and youth activities and schools. Invitations were first sent to gatekeepers, and they in turn distributed information and consent forms to parents of children in their groups. Arrangements for participation in focus groups were then made for those who were granted consent.

Each focus group contained between three and five participants,[[33]](#footnote-33) since this was considered an optimum number for each to be able to participate. In total thirteen focus groups were held, comprising 51 participants. The focus groups took place in the usual setting of the activity group or school to ensure that they felt comfortable, however, it was at a quiet time to ensure confidentiality.[[34]](#footnote-34) Some took place online to accommodate those living further afield. Focus groups were recorded for analysis purposes and the children were asked to keep confidential any content shared by other focus group participants.[[35]](#footnote-35) Participants were assured that no identifiable information would be used in the writing up of the project. The project was scrutinised and approved by the ethics committee of Liverpool Hope University, and they emphasised the importance of taking care that the focus group conversations did not make participants feel awkward or uncomfortable given the topics of conversation and the fact that they had been intentionally chosen since they were unconnected with church. Care was therefore taken to be sensitive to the young people throughout the conversation, particularly given the additional ethical issues present in focus groups.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Since the project had been commissioned by Scripture Union to explore the context of evangelism with young people, the focus group format was designed according to the key areas of their ‘Revealing Jesus’ mission framework[[37]](#footnote-37) (connect, explore, respond, grow), which seeks to reach out to those not in church and support those walking alongside them as they find and grow in faith. since the organisation had established this framework to underpin their work, it was decided that interview questions would follow a similar format to help to provide information to inform each of these stages. Question prompts were therefore formulated to explore each of these four focus areas, in addition to a few additional background questions (figure 1). Another paper will analyse the responses thematically, but this article employed discourse analysis to the whole interview transcripts, rather than individual questions, enabling identification of the underlying discourses to the participants experience and perspectives.

Critical discourse analysis was selected since it enabled exploration of the structure and expression of the language, in relation to the context. For the purpose of this project, it was key to analyse the data with a mind to the context of the comments. Equally, awareness of any power relations relating to the comments were beneficial to capture. The comments from the young people in the interviews were therefore examined in relation to the cultures of wider society in which the young people were a part.[[38]](#footnote-38) This enabled the tracking of connections between discourses and social reality, as proposed by Fairclough.[[39]](#footnote-39) Such analysis facilitated the research team to understand the perspectives of the young people in the context in which they existed, which was critical for this project.[[40]](#footnote-40) This also denaturalised the language to reveal the ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in the data.[[41]](#footnote-41) The analysis was carried out with attentiveness to three dimensions: the individual (micro perspective), the institutional dimension (meso perspective), and the societal dimension (macro perspective), in line with Fairclough’s approach and echoing Bronfenbrenner’s[[42]](#footnote-42) ecological systems model; emphasising the multiple levels of influences on a child. Adaptations of this to relate to a child’s hybrid reality also enabled a helpful context setting of these comments.[[43]](#footnote-43)

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| **Connect** | Who inspires you?  What do you think of influencers?  Do you know anyone who is a Christian?  Do you know anyone online who is Christian?  Where do you prefer to connect with people? Online or in person?  What could a young person do if they wanted to connect with God or spirituality? |
| **Explore** | What do children/young people think about God?  Would you ever look online for information about God? If so, where?  Do you prefer to explore faith or big life questions in person or online?  Where do you find the easiest places to connect with God or feel spiritual?  What impact do your family or friends have on how you explore your own faith or values? |
| **Respond** | What choices do children/young people have about faith or spirituality?  What do you think it means to follow God? Can children/young people follow God?  What could a young person do if they wanted to respond to God?  What help might children/young people need (online/in person)? |
| **Growth** | What does it look like to grow in faith/ spirituality?  Are there any ways online tools could help you get closer to God?  Can church help children/young people to grow in faith?  Are there any other ways? |
| **Additional** | What do you get out of time online?  Have you been able to make new or deeper connections through digital communication?  What’s special about those connections?  What’s one way you can be wise as you navigate the online world? |

**Figure 1: Questions prompts used in focus group sessions**

**4 Discourses identified in the focus group conversations**

***4.1 Participants comfortable with discussing topics***

During the focus group interviews, participants exhibited a comfort and ease of discussing a wide range of topics including family and friendship issues to engaging with the online world. The young people remained confident and engaged in taking part in the discussions and usually answered quickly and in a relaxed, natural manner, indicating their willingness and comfort to engage in such conversations. Whilst this may not be representative of their whole school, since the focus group participants were a sample who had self-selected to take part in this research project, it is still interesting to note that despite all being unconnected with church or faith prior to the focus group interviews, they were all relaxed, willing and engaged in the conversations on the topics outlined in figure 1. Generally, this was also true when the discussion turned to questions of God, faith and church. However, it became apparent very quickly that the four key areas of the Revealing Jesus framework were not relevant to many of these participants. The ‘connecting’ aspects were very much within the remit and experience of the participants, although whilst the participants were willing to talk about the ‘explore’ topics, it was clear that many of them did not wish to explore and indeed had never even considered it a need or possibility to do so. Many were slightly surprised in the interviews at the notion that someone would want to explore the Christian faith. For example, one child gave the below response, and this was typical of the tone of the interviews, where children were respectful and happy to converse on these topics but did not have any specific spiritual interest or connection themselves:

*‘I don’t really get big questions about faith.’*

This is something worth considering in formulating evangelistic approaches; that first there is a need to convey to a young person *why* it would be of benefit to explore Christianity. The subsequent concepts in figure 1 of responding and growing in faith were therefore rather alien to this participant group who were selected due to not being actively involved in the Christian faith.

Furthermore, distinct gaps were observed in vocabulary availability or understanding during some of the discussions. For example, one spoke about the notion of faith, but used the language of imagination, because this appeared to be the language that they had available related to their perception of spiritual interactions:

*‘In my opinion if you don’t follow God you just don’t have imagination. But if you do follow God then you do have imagination. We don’t have proof that God is real so we have to half imagine that he’s real. So, if you want to be a Christian or any faith, you need to just believe and imagine.’*

This comment is conveying a sense that ‘just believing’ is what is required, resonating with the notion of Disney magic,[[44]](#footnote-44) pixie magic or wishing upon a star.[[45]](#footnote-45) It is not surprising that pervasive concepts in media and film such as this will undoubtedly influence young people’s perspectives of interactions with a divine being. Formulation of evangelistic strategies need to therefore be attentive to the fact that even in the ‘connect’ stages, whilst young people may be willing to converse on these topics, many simply do not have pre-existing language or experience about the Christian faith to draw upon as part of these conversations.

* 1. ***Clear parameters of what constitutes a Christian***

At no point in the interviews did any participant waiver about what they perceived to constitute a Christian. This may again be due to the self-selecting nature of the sample who felt interested and/or confident in the topic, but nevertheless, participants answered questions on this topic confidently and without ambiguity. Ideas about what made a Christian were often rigid or concrete and were often indicative of a sense of ‘othering,’ the notion that they could point to someone who fulfilled the role of ‘Christian,’ but who was different from themselves and indicated a line of separation between themselves and ‘a Christian.’ When asked whether they knew anybody who was a Christian, there were a wide variety of responses indicating their perceptions of what being a Christian constituted. For many it was about whether an individual was baptised, such as:

*‘I’m baptised but I don’t go to church’*

Others spoke about physical attendance at church as being the marker of a Christian, but they expressed interesting interpretations of the requirements to attend church, such as this participant:

*‘I don’t go to the church down the road but I always go to the one that has activities every time. I only go to church at Easter and the summer holidays and quite a bit at Christmas. They always have activities set up there.’*

This intimated that the child was attending specific activities targeted towards them, and to which they were specifically invited. Nevertheless, this conveyed a sense of the child perceiving that being a Christian was connected with attending a church in some way. Similarly, a participant stated:

*‘my family is half Sikh and half Hindu and we go to the temple. A Christian might go to their church and speak to the priest or something like that.’*

This sense of connection of faith with a physical place was similarly depicted by two children who suggested that if someone wanted to find out more about God, they could:

*‘go to visit Bethlehem cos Jesus was born there.’*

*‘go and stand by a statue. They sometimes have information on a plaque and you can find out there.’*

This comment demonstrates attempts of the children to root spiritual experience with tangible or physical experiences or connections. This relates to responses about participant’s perceptions regarding following God, with many saying that it means to believe. One child went into depth about believing that Jesus is alive and we can pray to him. A typical response was:

*‘You don’t have to pray, you just have to believe that God exists, I see that as following God’*

This response implies a passivity rather than action in terms of believing. However, in a contrasting way, one child conveyed the need for much more active involvement, stating:

*‘Growing in faith means you get better and better at it. You might become a priest.*

When the young people were asked whether they knew anyone who was a Christian, they quickly said yes in very matter of fact ways, and all talked about people who they knew were baptised, intimating that was the definition of who was a Christian. This tended to be peers who they knew of in their school context or social circle, for example in one of the focus groups, when asked if they knew a Christian, four members of the group pointed to the fifth; "he is!" There were rarely mentions of adults known to them or any role model type of figures, although one child did mention their grandparents briefly as part of this conversation.

Overall, throughout these comments and responses, there was a strong sense that the participants were confident in their perceptions and understandings of what constituted a Christian and they did not indicate that they were in any way grappling with this or wanting to explore this further.

* 1. ***Absence of the Christian faith in the online world***

Responses to the various focus group questions conveyed little sense of the Christian faith being present in the online world of the participants. The only way participants spoke of online interaction with religion was for an RE class project:

*‘Everyone here looked online to find out about God. In RE for two weeks in a row we had a task to look on a website to search for things about God. Things like God is holy, all loving, all powerful and that.’*

When asked about whether they would trust online sources or people more, the participants provides very considered opinions, such as:

*‘If it was about Jesus’ birth, I wouldn't search online cos it could come up with inappropriate things. And if I searched about his death, it would give you pictures or facts that would give you nightmares. But if it’s about like what did Jesus do when he was alive, or what was the name of the man Jesus healed, then yes I would look online to find the facts.’*

Whereas another child stated that they would:

*‘ ask my mum cos then I know it's true’*

This response indicates an implicit trust and belief in what their parent figure expresses. Many of the children concurred with this sort of response, conveying that close friends or family members, or relationships of significance were perceived by many of the young people as sources of reliable information. This is interesting when compared with the below comment who perceived that online sources were more reliable, as long as they verified one another:

*‘I prefer to look online. Because sometimes people twist it to their own words or opinion. Or they tell you false information that didn’t actually happen. So if I look online and find 5 sites that tell me the same thing, then I know it’s true.’*

In contrast, another child stated that:

*‘I think it’s safer talking to a real person than it is online,’*

This perhaps results from online safety education which is universal in schools, whereby children are encouraged to think about the safety of who they are conversing with online. However, there was consensus amongst the children in the focus group discussions that whilst perhaps some information about faith can be researched online, it was not a good place to get closer to God, shown by this comment to which all others in the group agreed:

*‘I don’t think online can get you closer to God. But the only thing in the whole of online that is helpful is the RE website because it only had facts on and Bible verses on it. Nothing inappropriate. You can find out what God is like from the Bible.*

It was striking to note that although there was minimal presence of Christian faith in the online world of these participants, they all seemed to revert to people as being means of finding out about the Christian faith, rather than resources, activities or physical places. One child stated:

*‘It would be good to have them surrounded by people who believe in God because if not, then they will think it’s not real.’*

Another child said that:

*‘talking about God helps the information to sink in more, compared with if you just read it online.’*

This again reinforces the need that the participants seemed to be conveying about the significance and importance of people around them if they are exploring these topics. One child did seem to be the exception to this, as she stated she had used an online search to aid understanding of something raised by a person in school, exhibiting the possibility that both people and online sources could compliment one another:

*‘I searched at home cos my head teacher said something about God in assembly and I didn’t understand what it was so I went home and searched online to find out about it.’*

Another child commented that:

*'you could look online for a tutorial or something but I think it's better to experience it for yourself.’*

This is interesting because for this child, faith seems to be viewed as a more active and experienced entity, rather than mere knowledge which many of the other participants were conveying in their answers. The children in one of the focus group discussions spoke fondly about a visitor to the school:

*‘There is a lady who comes in called Jane\* on a Thursday and she’s really qualified in this stuff. And she talks to us about our feelings and what we can decide and who we can talk to about big questions. So I might ask her if I have big questions sometime. She’s quite like talking therapy. She’s not a normal teacher cos if you ask her a question she’s really nice and would actually answer it.’*

A discussion then ensued in the group with all of the children speaking warmly and fondly about this visitor rather than the harsh relationship they described with their teacher who would just tell them to sit down and be quiet. It is striking that the above conversation indicates a blend of feelings and emotional literacy with spiritual or religious literacy in the mindset of the child. This may be best both perhaps feel intangible and are therefore considered in the same category for the child.

When asked about what they had watched, participants tended to talk about individual characters they had seen who were ‘believers’ rather than content about faith. An example is the below comment about a character in the programme *Young Sheldon:*

*‘I watch Young Sheldon and his mum is a real big Christian’*

When asked whether they knew anyone who was Christian online, it was interesting that their starting point was who they knew that was a Christian, and then thought about whether that person ‘went online.’ For example, one girl turned to her friend and said ‘are you a Christian?’ When she said yes, the girl asked ‘and you go online don’t you?’ Upon gaining a positive response, she then happily turned to the interviewer and said ‘then yes, I do know someone who is a Christian online.’ Responses such as this indicated that there were no explicit Christian role models or interactions about Christianity online, in the experience of participants. Indeed, the young people said that online accounts are private so they wouldn’t know online if someone is Christian, unless they were known offline and knew in that way they were a Christian.

This all shows a discourse of the Christian faith being very limited in terms of content and useful interaction online, and a preference and reliance by the children upon people as sources of such information. These may be people close to them such as family members, or slightly more distant such as visitors in school, or even characters on programmes they watch. Nevertheless, people seem to be the main influence and conduit of Christian faith influence upon these participant young people.

This fits within a wider context where young people viewed online interactions as an opportunity to extend or strengthen pre-existing friendships and relationships rather than as a space where they would choose to meet new people.

* 1. ***Being pushed away or towards faith***

There was notable discourse from the young people about being pushed towards or away from faith depending on whether people around them believed, intimating that these forces were outside of their control. The participants spoke of these forces as pushing them, carrying connotations of minimal choice, agency or intentionality on the part of the child about it. And yet there was mere acceptance of this in the conversations and it was talked about in very matter of fact ways, for example this comment below:

*‘Hey guys, I just thought: I watch Young Sheldon and his mum is a real big Christian. Goes to church everyday. I watch that and that pushes me to God. So I’m half and half. Because she literally cries when she prays, so that pushes me back. She makes them pray for dinner and about the dinner in the mornings and that. So that pushes me back to being closer to God.’*

The child was describing that seeing a character in a TV programme being an active Christian pushes them more towards God due to fervency of faith. But they described themselves as ‘half and half’ because they indicated they did not have their own faith but had been pushed towards believing in God due to watching this, and hence they were in some sort of middle position of belief.

Another child stated that it was highly dependant upon one’s family upbringing:

*‘If you always stick to what you’ve known as a child… if you were brought up believing in God, you will always believe in God…only if you don’t do what your childhood self did, then then you won’t believe in God.’*

In response, another child stated:

*‘yes, but then if your friend doesn’t believe, that will take you away from that’*

Again, this is exhibiting the sense of being pushed around in terms of their religious beliefs and persuasions, buffeted by the beliefs of those they encounter. On a slightly different vein, one participant stated that their beliefs would alter according to their own experience:

*‘if I pray and don’t get an answer, then I don’t think he’s real.’*

Whilst another responded with some regret:

*‘My mum and dad don’t believe in God so when I was little I didn’t even know he existed.’*

This again indicates a sense that the child did not feel they had their own agency or choice about faith or religious belief and that this was predetermined by their parent’s lack of belief in God. However, this comment in itself was unusual across the range of interviews.

* 1. ***Perception that an absence of spiritual content does not influence them***

In contrasts with the above comment, there was a far more widely accepted perspective that the presence of spiritual content would influence them, but not that the absence of content would not influence them. When asked about whether things they watched influenced their beliefs and values, they again talk about the void of faith and spirituality being present in the things they watched, and therefore they concluded that they did not influence them.

When asked about whether their family or friends influenced their faith, they said that no they didn’t because most of their family and friends don’t talk about faith or God. For example, ‘My mum's side wants to raise us as atheists to begin with and if we want to go off and explore it later, we can. She doesn't want us to be influenced by that’ and ‘My family don't because they aren't Christians and they don’t like talking about it.’ This lack of awareness by the young people that they were being influenced by absence of faith around them, whether in people or online places, is notable. Although one child did say that they felt pushed away from God because their friends have not been baptised, indicating some awareness that their own faith or belief was altered due to that of their friend.

Alongside the absence of influence, it was interesting that in all of the focus group conversations, none of the participants mentioned any negative influences or images, people or activities which put them off Christianity. Indeed, there seemed to be an underlying discourse that any mention of God or faith ‘pushes them towards God.’

* 1. ***Counter cultural***

There were a number of aspects where the focus group participants revealed that they perceived belief in God to be counter-cultural. Firstly, there was a very strong underlying discourse of a firm & resolute belief that there is no scientific proof that God exists but that it is about feelings, shown by comments such as ‘feel he’s real’ and ‘if you use your imagination you can believe.’ Participants happily chatted about how they sought to reconcile the two strands of this together. One child stated:

*‘We were talking about the Big Bang in class and about half the people thought it was the Big Bang and the other half thought it was God! I think there was a Big Bang that started everything off then God made all the bits out of that.’*

Further to this, one child stated that teachers wouldn’t talk to them about faith or God, but only the Teaching Assistants or visitors would. All of the children in the focus group agreed with this sentiment that Christianity or trust in God is more of an aspect of one’s feelings than a factually-proved entity. This is shown by the fact that their perception is that the teacher is responsible for transferring knowledge and factual information to them, whilst the Teaching Assistants are more able to support children with their feelings or activity related to supporting the children beyond the core taught content.

Another instance of participants conveying the Christian faith as counter-cultural was when a child explained that they felt individuals in secondary school should not or world not be active in terms of faith:

*‘When you’re in primary school you have a big imagination. Then when you’re in secondary school, your imagination gets really small and it comes back when you leave secondary school. That’s because it's not cool at secondary school and people get bullied for their beliefs and stuff. I just know that it happens in secondary school. So they go away from it in secondary school. But then it comes back when you leave secondary so you do it again when you’re an adult.’*

Another child stated that:

*‘A lot of children do not believe in God so they just pretend to pray in school because you have to.’*

This comment again exhibits the counter-cultural nature of faith amongst modern-day children and young people.

**5 Discussion**

This article set out to examine the context for evangelism amongst children and young people, and to consider the extent to which this was most appropriate through in person, online or hybrid approaches. The underlying discourses arising within the focus group interviews indicate a tacit and fundamental awareness of Christianity and a sense that the children and young people in this study felt confident in their understanding and perceptions of this. The participants readily discussed these issues with the researchers, indicating a willingness and openness on the topic, despite a discourse of faith and spirituality being counter-cultural and something which is often intangible and lacking evidence or proof. However, it was clear that evangelistic strategies needed to focus very much in the ‘connect’ stage of the processes outlined in figure 1, with significant need to convey to young people *why* they would want or need to ‘explore’ the Christian faith, because the majority of the participants were unclear why someone their age would want to explore Christianity. The fact that the participants viewed faith as counter-cultural was not surprising, although it was striking how one child particularly spoke of different ages and stages being warmer to faith, and citing secondary school specifically as a time when there generally is reluctance to be connected with or to discuss faith or religious belief. This connects with the reality that young people will exhibit great variety about the extent to which they wish to converse about God.[[46]](#footnote-46) This landscape is important to be aware of for any individuals or organisations who are formulating evangelism strategies amongst this demographic.

Regarding the contexts and potential possibilities of connecting with children and young people, it was very striking that despite spending considerable time connecting with the online world as part of their daily lives, very few participants indicated that they had or would connect with God or faith online. The only occasions that online arenas had been consulted was for knowledge-based queries, such as religious homework where children were required to find out factual information about the faith. There was no sense at all of spiritual activity occurring online, or spiritual support or mentoring, or even exploring big questions related to faith. It seemed very clear that the children and young people in this study simply did not perceive that Christianity or God would be present in the online domain. When asked about what may be helpful, they tended to cite people who were significant to them or physical and tangible places. This is helpful information to inform evangelistic strategies, whereby Christians are seeking to reach out to children and young people in the online space. It is clear that for these participants, the human connection remains very important, particularly with those who are already known to the children and hence are trusted beings. This suggests that explorations of hybrid evangelism may be more impactful than online activity alone, resonating with the notion that social media can enhance in-person activity.[[47]](#footnote-47) Similar to Root’s call in 2007[[48]](#footnote-48) for the church to be friends and connect with the groups of adolescents hanging round doorways; it seems that there is now a need to call for the church to be relationally available online, to befriend and connect with young people as part of their every day life.

It was interesting to note children’s perceptions about what influenced them. It seems that they were expressing being influenced by anything and anyone around them, without filtering these influences or activating any of their own mind or will as part of this influence, shown by their comments about being ‘pushed’ to and from faith or God. The children seemed to be acutely aware of these influences upon themselves but did not seem to feel that they had any form of agency in that. This is key for evangelistic organisations to note, so that they can be aware of the sensitivities and realities surrounding the interactions they have with young people about faith. Equally, it may be key to empower children so that they can be active agents in their own spiritual lives and beliefs, rather than passive which is what these participants tended to portray. It was striking to note that there did not seem to be any negative influences detailed by the children, suggesting that any input or contact at all with children and young people related to faith may be beneficial and ‘push’ them towards God. This prompts various ethical questions and parameters to be considered. For evangelistic organisations, it seems that changing the outlook for children and young people to see the online world as a place where they could connect with faith and spirituality would be a significant paradigm shift and help to broaden the scope for evangelistic work in that arena.

These findings therefore inform onward strategies, approaches and theologies of evangelism amongst children and young people within contemporary culture. The present missional framework of Scripture Union: ‘Revealing Jesus’[[49]](#footnote-49) seeks to connect, explore, respond and grow faith in children and young people. This is a very ambitious goal since for many of the children in these focus groups it was clear that even the initial step of connecting was a significant challenge and that there is much work to be done to enable children and young people to connect with God and faith online. Awareness of the gaps in language and conceptual understanding and awareness of modern-day children and young people is key to ensure that evangelism is effective, ethical and relevant to a generation for whom following something is expressed as a physical and tangible entity, whereas the concept of God tends to be perceived as less tangible.[[50]](#footnote-50)

**6 Conclusion**

In response to the research question about the context for evangelism amongst children and young people in the present day, this article examined some of the lived experiences and perceptions of this age group. Since this research only collected data from 51 young people, it therefore cannot claim to be in any way representative, although the in-depth nature of the conversations with participants provides tentative findings which may help to inform this area further. Through discourse analysis of the focus group interviews with 7- to 16-year-olds, it was evident that the participants were willing to discuss the topics of God and faith, although they had minimal language and experience to draw upon in the discussions, and the majority were not at the stage of wishing to explore the Christian faith. Whether online or in person, awareness of the gaps and lack of existing knowledge and language related to the Christian faith is key in formulating missional or evangelistic strategies, so that evangelistic approaches may appropriately respond to the needs of modern-day children and young people. Most of the participants felt they knew what a Christian was, although their impression was often vague and mis-informed. Therefore, greater attention to informing children and young people through various media about what constitutes a Christian and the essence of the Christian faith would be beneficial in ensuring that this demographic is better informed about Christianity so that they can opt to explore in a more informed manner. One of our findings was that according to these young people, there is minimal evidence of information or content about the Christian faith available in the online realm accessed by them. Addressing this and seeking to markedly increase the availability of trustworthy content about the Christian faith in the online realm would be a beneficial approach to underpin ongoing evangelistic strategies amongst this age group.

Other key discourses we identified were that the participants conveyed a sense of being pushed or pulled towards or away from faith according to the pressures and influences around them, conveying a lack of agency and active choice about their beliefs. As part of this, they believed that the lack of Christian influences or awareness which they have does not influence their beliefs at all. Pioneering work therefore needs to be done to facilitate a paradigm shift to empower children and young people to know that they have a voice and can be agents in formulating their own values and beliefs. This may also serve to prompt and support children and young people to actively and intentionally enter a phase of exploration around the Christian faith.

It was very clear throughout the various discourses identified that whilst these participants are active in the online realm, they trust in-person interactions much more. Many spoke of the possibilities to gather information *about* things online, but then they would wish to explore this further in person. These comments indicate that a blend of online and in-person interactions would be an effective arena for evangelistic efforts to operate. In exploring future possibilities for evangelism strategies, ensuring that activities seeking to connect with faith are couched in existing relationships and connections which the young people have will aid the work to be enhanced and more effective. However, they could also signpost online specific sources as part of a young person’s exploration journey. Likewise, where there are online opportunities for young people to find out about the Christian faith, our findings indicate that it would be most effective if these then signposted back to in person opportunities, such as their local church, friends or trusted others they already know. The young person could then explore the online content through in-person dialogue to enhance effectiveness.

Whilst this research was commissioned by Scripture Union to inform their ongoing strategy, the findings are relevant to any individual or organisation planning evangelistic endeavours amongst children and young people. These research findings relating to the context for evangelism amongst children and young people will serve to inform the establishing of future strategies and approaches to evangelism amongst this sector and ensure that there is greater focus on the needs and opportunities, enabling greater effectiveness.

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