

Educators' Faith-Integrated Practices and Academic Motivation among Senior High School Learners: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

Glen Mar M. De Lana¹, Jairus B. Bryanson Bondad¹, Sheila V. Mae Bailado¹, Mikylla M. Samson¹,
Ylishhan A. Aner Alamag¹

¹Senior High School Department, Lipa Adventist Academy, Lipa City, Batangas, Philippines

Corresponding author: Glen Mar M. De Lana

Abstract

Academic motivation is shaped not only by learners' personal goals but also by the instructional, relational, and spiritual conditions created by teachers. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how senior high school learners in a private Adventist school in Batangas, Philippines, perceived educator practices that shaped their academic motivation. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, the study focused on autonomy, competence, and relatedness while also examining the faith-integrated character of Adventist pedagogy. Three Grade 11 and Grade 12 learners who had experienced the school culture for at least three years were purposively selected for one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, coded deductively using the three psychological needs and inductively for emergent faith-based meanings, and checked through participant validation, analytic memoing, and an audit trail. Five themes were generated: faith integration gave learning spiritual purpose; autonomy was strengthened through choice, leadership, and ownership; competence developed through clear explanations and formative feedback; relatedness emerged through caring, family-like teacher-student relationships; and the learning environment became motivating when spiritual, social, and academic support were experienced inclusively. Findings suggest that teacher practices motivate learners most strongly when they connect academic work to purpose, offer meaningful choice, make difficult tasks manageable, and sustain respectful relationships. The study contributes context-sensitive evidence for motivation-building practices in faith-based basic education and offers implications for teacher development in Adventist schools.

Keywords: Academic motivation, Adventist Education, Faith-integrated learning, Self-Determination Theory

INTRODUCTION

Academic motivation is central to learners' persistence, effort, and engagement in school. It explains why students continue working through difficult tasks, participate in classroom activities, and develop confidence in their capacity to learn. In senior high school, motivation becomes especially important because learners are negotiating heavier academic demands, identity formation, peer belonging, and decisions about future study or work.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a useful explanation of how classroom environments support or weaken motivation. SDT proposes that learners are more likely to internalize academic goals when three basic psychological needs are supported: autonomy, or the experience of choice and volition; competence, or the experience of being capable and improving; and relatedness, or the experience of belonging and being valued by significant others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In school settings, teachers influence these

needs through the way they give feedback, explain lessons, structure tasks, offer choices, and build relationships (Conesa et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2021).

Teacher practices are therefore not limited to the delivery of content. They include motivational communication, scaffolding, emotional support, classroom climate, and the meaning teachers attach to learning. Prior studies on motivation show that autonomy-supportive and structured teaching can improve engagement, while caring relationships can increase students' willingness to participate and persist (Assor et al., 2002; Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Jang et al., 2010; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Su & Reeve, 2011). However, the motivational meaning of these practices can vary across educational cultures and institutional missions.

Faith-based education adds another layer to the motivation process. Adventist education emphasizes holistic development and the integration of faith and learning, where academic content is connected to spiritual purpose, character formation, service, and a view of learners as whole persons. In such a context, motivation may be shaped not only by grades or personal interest but also by perceived meaning, moral responsibility, relationships with teachers, and the spiritual atmosphere of the school. SDT is useful for examining this process because it explains how external values can become more personally endorsed when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

Despite the established importance of teacher support and SDT, less is known about how senior high school learners in Adventist basic education describe the day-to-day practices that shape their academic motivation. Much of the available discussion on faith integration emphasizes philosophy and institutional mission; fewer studies foreground learners' lived experiences of faith-integrated pedagogy. This gap matters because motivation-building strategies are most useful when they are grounded in how students actually interpret teacher actions.

This study aimed to explore how senior high school learners perceive educator practices that shape academic motivation in a faith-based learning environment. Specifically, it examined how students described motivation within faith-integrated instruction and how they experienced autonomy, competence, and relatedness through teacher practices.

METHODS

Research design

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of senior high school learners regarding educator practices and academic motivation. Phenomenology was appropriate because the purpose was not to measure the size of an effect but to describe the meaning learners attached to teacher actions in a specific school culture. SDT served as the sensitizing theoretical framework. The analysis used autonomy, competence, and relatedness as deductive lenses while remaining open to additional meanings that emerged from the participants' accounts, particularly faith integration and spiritual purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

To strengthen methodological rigor, the researchers treated SDT as an interpretive guide rather than a forced coding scheme. Reflexive notes were kept during coding to distinguish participants' meanings from researchers' assumptions as student-researchers within a faith-based educational context.

Participants and sampling

Participants were three senior high school learners enrolled during school year 2025-2026 in a Private Adventist basic education institution in Batangas, Philippines. The research

site is described generically to protect contextual confidentiality. Purposive sampling was used because the study required information-rich participants who had sufficient experience of the institution's teaching culture and could articulate detailed accounts of motivation.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) bona fide Grade 11 or Grade 12 status, (b) at least three years of experience in the school, and (c) willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Students who did not meet these criteria or who were unwilling to be recorded were excluded. No statistical sample size calculation was conducted because the study was qualitative. Instead, adequacy was judged through information power: the study had a narrow aim, a specific theoretical lens, and participants with direct experience of the phenomenon (Malterud et al., 2016). The small sample is acknowledged as a limitation and the findings are presented as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable.

Instrument

Data were generated using a semi-structured interview guide developed from the research questions and SDT constructs. The guide included opening questions about the meaning of motivation, followed by prompts on faith-integrated learning, choice and ownership, teacher feedback, difficult academic tasks, belonging, teacher-student relationships, and the school environment. Semi-structured interviewing allowed the researchers to ask consistent core questions while using probes such as 'Can you give a specific example?' and 'Why did that experience affect your motivation?'

Instrument validity was addressed through construct alignment and adviser review. Each question was mapped to one or more SDT needs or to the faith-integration focus of the study. The SDT domains reflected prior classroom and interpersonal-behavior measures of need support, while the open-ended format preserved participants' own meanings (Conesa & Dunabeitia, 2021; Rocchi et al., 2017). Because the instrument was used for qualitative meaning-making, reliability was addressed through protocol consistency, verbatim transcription, code-recode checking, and documentation of analytic decisions rather than through internal consistency statistics.

Data Collection

Administrative permission was sought from the school before data collection. Participants were oriented about the study purpose, voluntary participation, expected interview duration, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet room such as a library or vacant classroom and lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes on nonverbal emphasis and contextual observations. The reporting of interview procedures was guided by qualitative reporting standards for interview studies (Tong et al., 2007).

Audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team and adviser. Participants were assigned pseudonyms (Participant A, Participant B, and Participant C) in transcripts, tables, and the final manuscript. Administrative permission and school-level ethics clearance were obtained before data collection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. First, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly for familiarization. Second, meaningful segments were coded using SDT-informed deductive codes for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Third, inductive codes were added when participants described meanings not

fully captured by the three needs, including faith as inspiration, practical life application, character building, spiritual purpose, and inclusiveness. Fourth, related codes were clustered into candidate themes and compared across participants. Fifth, themes were refined by checking whether they were supported by direct excerpts and whether they answered the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility was strengthened through member checking of summary interpretations, use of representative quotations, and peer/adviser review of theme names. Dependability was supported by an audit trail containing the interview guide, transcripts, coded excerpts, analytic memos, and theme revisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memoing and by grounding claims in participant excerpts. Transferability was supported through thick description of the educational context without disclosing unnecessary identifying information (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tong et al., 2007).

RESULTS

The analysis generated five themes describing how educator practices shaped academic motivation. The themes show that motivation in the studied faith-based context was not experienced as a single classroom factor. Instead, it emerged from the interaction of spiritual purpose, meaningful choice, perceived capability, caring relationships, and the broader school climate.

Table 2. Themes and representative evidence from participant interviews

Theme	Meaning	Representative evidence
Faith-integrated learning as purpose	Spiritual connections made lessons meaningful, practical, and tied to character formation.	Participants described Bible-based links, real-life application, and understanding purpose as reasons to stay engaged.
Autonomy through choice and ownership	Choice, leadership, and personally meaningful tasks made learners feel responsible for their own work.	Participants valued decisions made by group members and topic choices that allowed them to use their own words and interests.
Competence through clarity and feedback	Teachers supported confidence by simplifying difficult ideas, breaking tasks into steps, and treating feedback as guidance.	Participants described difficult subjects becoming manageable when teachers explained concepts patiently and constructively.
Relatedness through caring teacher-student bonds	Motivation increased when learners felt seen as persons, not only as students.	Participants recalled teachers checking on their well-being, showing parental-like care, and becoming trusted sources of support.
Inclusive holistic environment	The school environment became motivating when faith, freedom, encouragement, friendship, and fairness were experienced together.	Participants noted that motivation can drop when attention appears selective, but grows when teachers treat students with care and love.

To preserve the participants' voices, selected excerpts are presented with English translations in Table 3. Filipino and code-switched responses were translated for publication while retaining the meaning of the original statements.

Table 3. Selected participant excerpts with English translations

Theme	Participant excerpt	English translation
Faith-integrated learning	Participant A: " <i>Kapag nabanggit na yung... about Bible, spiritual, medyo nakaka-inspired.</i> "	When Bible or spiritual topics are mentioned, it feels somewhat inspiring.
Faith-integrated learning	Participant B: " <i>Mas na-amaze ako kung paano siya... na-apply talaga in real life.</i> "	I was more amazed by how it was truly applied in real life.
Autonomy	Participant A: " <i>Mas maganda talaga na may sarili kang decision, hindi lang sumusunod sa instructions.</i> "	It is better when you can make your own decision, instead of only following instructions.

Autonomy	Participant B: <i>"Strict... set ng instructions... minsan parang nakakasakal."</i>	A strict set of instructions sometimes feels suffocating.
Competence	Participant B: <i>"Ang way ng pagtuturo niya is... the simplest or the easiest way para ma-solve yung problem."</i>	The teacher's way of teaching used the simplest or easiest way to solve the problem.
Competence	Participant A: <i>"Nakatulong siya na marealize ko na kaya ko palang gawin yung mga ganung bagay."</i>	It helped me realize that I could actually do those kinds of things.
Relatedness	Participant A: <i>"Kinonsider niya yung pagka-hospitalize ko... I felt so special."</i>	The teacher considered my hospitalization, and I felt so special.
Relatedness	Participant B: <i>"Doon ko na feel na parang nanay si Ma'am ... comforting yung presence niya."</i>	That was when I felt Ma'am was like a mother; her presence was comforting.
Holistic environment	Participant A: <i>"May mga specific students lang din talaga silang kinakausap masyado."</i>	There really seem to be only specific students whom they talk to often.
Holistic environment	Participant C: <i>"Freedom, encouragement, and faith integration makes learning in our school unique and fulfilling."</i>	Freedom, encouragement, and faith integration make learning in our school unique and fulfilling.

Faith-integrated learning as purpose

Participants described faith integration as a primary source of meaning in learning. Rather than viewing schoolwork only as a route to grades, they associated lessons with spiritual reflection, practical decisions, and character formation. As shown in Table 3, one participant reported that biblical references in class were inspiring, while another emphasized that faith became meaningful when connected to real experiences faced by teenagers. A third participant explained that linking academic topics to God's plan made learning more than a collection of facts. These accounts suggest that faith-integrated pedagogy can support internalization by connecting academic work to purpose, values, and identity.

Autonomy through choice and ownership

Participants experienced autonomy when teachers allowed them to lead, decide, create, and select personally meaningful topics. Leadership roles made learners feel accountable for group outcomes, while project choice increased ownership and creativity. The excerpt from Participant A in Table 3 illustrates that decision-making was experienced as more motivating than merely following instructions. However, Participant B's translated excerpt also shows that highly strict instructions could feel constraining. Autonomy was therefore not experienced as the absence of structure; rather, students valued structure that left room for voice, initiative, and personal relevance.

Competence through clarity and feedback

A sense of competence developed when teachers made difficult tasks understandable. Participants described effective teachers as those who simplified complex concepts, explained step by step, and helped learners realize that they were capable of succeeding. Participant B's excerpt in Table 3 shows how simplified explanations made problem solving accessible, while Participant A's excerpt shows how encouragement helped learners recognize their own capability. Feedback also shaped competence. When correction was delivered as guidance rather than criticism, learners interpreted mistakes as part of improvement. These findings show that competence support involved both instructional clarity and emotionally safe feedback.

Relatedness through caring teacher-student bonds

Relatedness was the strongest relational thread in the interviews. Participants described motivation increasing when teachers showed personal concern, remembered difficult life

events, prayed with students, and created trust. The hospitalization and mother-like presence excerpts in Table 3 show that relatedness was experienced through concrete acts of care, not only through general classroom friendliness. Some accounts described teachers as parental figures, suggesting that relatedness in this faith-based school carried a family-like quality. However, participants also cautioned that relatedness must be inclusive. Motivation may weaken when students perceive that teachers interact warmly only with selected learners.

Inclusive holistic environment

Participants' final reflections show that the school environment shaped motivation holistically. Friendships, teacher approachability, faith integration, leadership, and encouragement worked together. The final two excerpts in Table 3 show both sides of this environment: motivation was strengthened by freedom, encouragement, and faith integration, but it could be weakened when students perceived selective attention from teachers. Thus, the findings point to a whole-school view of motivation: academic drive is strengthened when learners experience spiritual purpose, social belonging, and teacher support as connected parts of daily school life.

DISCUSSION

The findings support SDT's claim that motivation is strengthened when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Howard et al., 2021; Vasconcellos et al., 2020). In this study, however, these needs were expressed through the language and practices of a faith-based school. Autonomy appeared in opportunities for leadership, creative choice, and ownership of topics. Competence appeared in patient explanation, scaffolded instruction, and feedback that protected students' belief in their capacity to improve. Relatedness appeared in teacher care, spiritual companionship, trust, and inclusive belonging.

The translated excerpts deepen the interpretation of these themes by showing how motivation was narrated in everyday student language. Words such as "inspiring," "suffocating," "simplest," "special," and "comforting" show that teacher practices were not experienced merely as instructional techniques. They were felt as emotional and spiritual conditions that either opened or narrowed students' willingness to engage. This supports the study's interpretation that motivation in the setting was simultaneously academic, relational, and faith-informed.

The first theme extends the SDT interpretation by showing that faith integration may help learners internalize academic goals. When students connect learning to spiritual purpose, character, and service, academic tasks become more than external requirements. This supports the view that meaningful rationales and value alignment can increase internalization (Assor et al., 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In Adventist education, faith integration may therefore function as both a pedagogical practice and a motivational resource when it is concrete, age-relevant, and connected to learners' real decisions.

The autonomy findings are consistent with research showing that students benefit when teachers provide meaningful choices rather than purely controlling instructions (Patall et al., 2008; Reeve, 2006). Importantly, students did not reject structure. They appreciated guidance, expectations, and responsibility, but they wanted those structures to allow personal voice. This suggests that teacher training should not frame autonomy support as simply giving freedom; it should help teachers design structured choices that allow students to act with ownership (Aelterman et al., 2019; Jang et al., 2010; Leenknecht et al., 2017).

The competence findings highlight the motivational role of instructional clarity. Participants were motivated when teachers made difficult topics manageable and treated

feedback as a path to improvement. This aligns with growth-oriented teaching and research on structure in autonomy-supportive classrooms (Claro et al., 2016; Jang et al., 2010, 2016). A faith-based school that values holistic formation can strengthen competence by combining high expectations with patient explanation, formative feedback, and encouragement.

The relatedness findings show that caring relationships were not peripheral to academic motivation; they were central. Students' accounts of being remembered during illness, being checked on outside class, and trusting teachers through prayer-based interactions suggest that relatedness can create emotional security for academic risk-taking (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Skinner et al., 2008). At the same time, the concern about selective attention is important. A family-like school culture can motivate learners only when care is perceived as fair and inclusive.

Practically, the study suggests that motivation-building practices in faith-based senior high school classrooms should include four priorities: integrate faith with real-life applications rather than using it only as ritual; provide structured opportunities for student choice and leadership; explain difficult concepts in manageable steps with feedback framed as guidance; and build inclusive teacher-student relationships that make every learner feel seen. These priorities are consistent with evidence that teacher motivating style can be developed through intentional practice and intervention (Aelterman et al., 2019; Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Su & Reeve, 2011).

Limitations

The study is limited by its small sample of three participants from one faith-based institution. The findings cannot be generalized statistically to all Adventist schools or all senior high school learners. Self-report data may also be influenced by memory, social desirability, and students' relationship to the school. Nevertheless, the use of direct narratives, member checking, audit trail documentation, and thick description supports the credibility and transferability of the findings for similar educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study found that educator practices shaped academic motivation through five connected processes: faith-integrated learning gave academic work spiritual purpose; choice and leadership supported autonomy; clear explanation and constructive feedback supported competence; caring teacher-student relationships supported relatedness; and an inclusive holistic environment connected academic, social, and spiritual growth.

The findings answer the research objective by showing that learners experienced motivation most strongly when teachers supported the whole person. For faith-based schools, the implication is that motivation-building should not be reduced to rewards, grades, or isolated classroom techniques. It should be embedded in teacher practices that make learning meaningful, manageable, relational, and spiritually purposeful.

Future research may expand the sample across multiple Adventist schools, include teachers and parents as additional data sources, and examine how autonomy, competence, relatedness, and faith integration influence learners over time. Schools may also use the findings to design teacher development sessions on faith-integrated pedagogy, formative feedback, inclusive care, and structured student choice.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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