



I still remember the first time someone called me a “schools worker”. They’d heard that I was part of an organisation doing work in schools, and put the two together (that is, “work” and “schools”...only the other way around), and decided that I could be called a “schools worker”. Makes sense, really, but still I was caught off guard.

Here I was, having spent 3 years teaching, 4 years running after-schools clubs, and 5 years doing youth work in church, and still I’d never actually been called a schools worker. I was even a couple of years in at the school-focused Christian charity I now help run, but somehow I’d still managed to avoid that title... and strangely, it didn’t sit right.

Sure, I’d spent years working with school-aged young people, both in and out of the school environment, and I’d visited countless Christian Unions and other school groups to encourage them, resource them and pray with them. But I’d never stood in a filled auditorium and done an assembly, run the school RE program or been a chaplain, and therefore, I just never made the connection between myself and the term. Strange perhaps, but true.

I’ve since grown used to the title, and it’s now a natural part of the way I present myself and what I do. But for some of you, it’s still not a name you’d give yourself, because like me, you don’t do those things that you’ve always associated with “schools work”.

WHAT IS SCHOOLS WORK?

So, what is schools work? Is it really “just” assemblies and RE? Or is there more to it than that?

Firstly, I’d like to suggest that it’s not just about working in school, but also about working with people who spend time in school. Most of us would agree that a pastor can use a Sunday morning service inside his church to impact his community, through challenging, teaching and encouraging his congregation to live out their faith at work and be light in their neighbourhood. In the same way, it makes sense that a youth worker can impact schools on a Friday or Saturday night at youth, or that a parent can impact schools daily at the dinner table, by challenging, teaching and encouraging their young people to live out their faith in the classroom.

Actually, the simple fact that we’re working with young people means that we’re doing schools work, whether we realise it or not. The ones we disciple and mentor in home groups, at youth or on residential are the ones we need to be envisioning to see school as their mission field.

Whatever our role, we need to be intentional about helping the young people around us to see their school as an important place to live out their faith. For many, that’ll be through personal, intentional evangelism and outreach where they openly share their faith with friends. For others, it will be through prayer for classmates and asking God to intervene and bring solutions to the problems and issues they see amongst their friends. For others still, it will be through organising social action projects and raising awareness for issues of justice. For all of them, it will be in how they talk and think and act; how they treat those around them; how they deal with criticism, anger or disappointment. Every day they have amazing opportunities to grow as believers and to influence those around them, and we have the amazing opportunity to be part of that by helping shape the way they “do their faith”, and by equipping them to live out the kingdom of God in their schools, and be light to their world.

I think this is one of the biggest shifts I've seen in schools work and youth work over the last few years. Of course it's actually nothing new, but I'd like to think I'm seeing a renewed passion to intentionally train and equip young people to express their faith in school, and I'm hearing more and more people talk about empowering teenagers to reach their friends with the Christian message. It doesn't mean that they're replacing the rest of us youth leaders and schools workers (yes, I now include myself in that category). Instead, it's an opportunity for us all to play to our strengths and stand together in working to see the kingdom of God made tangible and visible in our schools, and to see ourselves as living stones that fit together to become what God wants to make of us. Some of us doing assemblies, others coaching CUs, others gearing our Friday night talks around faith in school. All of us working together to help our young people make the most of their school years.

HOW DO WE DO IT?

But how does that look, and how do we do our schools work effectively?

There's obviously no one, simple answer to that. For many of us it's just a matter of continuing with what we're already doing, but with renewed purpose and intentionality. For others, it's about making some adjustments and making sure schools are a key part of what we do from now on.

That said, there are some things I've seen helping over the past few years at New Generation and elsewhere that I believe we can all implement when working with school-aged young people.

Make It Important

If young people don't see the needs in their schools as needs, and they don't make the connection and understand that their faith is relevant to those needs, they won't bother sharing what they believe. I could pull out all kinds of statistics here to highlight issues young people face today, but most of you will be familiar with the figures, and probably have done research of your own, not to mention having seen a lot of it first hand as you interact with young people. Knowing is good, but the next step is to translate that to our young people and help them understand how and where their faith fits in, and what God has to say to these situations. I'm convinced that when our young people see that they have an important part to play in the call to go into all the world and make disciples, teaching others what we've learnt, many of them will find that exciting and energising.

Make It Attractive

This may seem like a shallow one to some, but we live in a world where so many things are trying to grab our attention. Researchers say between 1600 and 3000 adverts pass us by daily, and we're constantly surrounded by beckoning banners and neon signs, all claiming to have what we need to make us happy. Whether it be the golden arches with their promise of a quick burger or a Happy Meal, a Nike ad subtly suggesting that their latest high-tops are all we need to make that dunk, or another smooth iPod commercial wooing us into the world of digital downloads, we're being bombarded 24-7. Now, faith isn't about shouting the loudest or about hype and glamour or good looks, but it does need to be attractive. A wise Christian leader once said that "It's okay for people to reject the Gospel because of Jesus, but not because of the packaging", and I think there's a lot to be learnt from that. A lot of people don't get past our initial presentation of the Christian message, simply because it's not very good. And, I think it goes further...many times I think young people hesitate to share their faith in the first place, because they've not been equipped to do it well and they expect to be rejected or laughed at. Sharing our faith will always be daunting and scary to some degree, but wouldn't it be great if we could at least remove that one barrier? If we could equip our young people to share their faith well, and put good resources in their hands to do it? Stuff they can be proud of, so at least we can remove that embarrassment and give them a better chance of coming away feeling good.

▶ Make It Normal

One of my chief goals in youth work (and life) is to make it normal to share faith again. For so many of us there's a constant temptation to let our beliefs remain a private matter and not to talk to anyone about it for fear of rocking the boat, but the Bible says something different. The Bible says we're a light on a hill, and that that just cannot be hidden. Acts speaks of disciples that couldn't keep quiet about what they'd seen and heard. So, every time I speak to a group of young people and I show a picture and share a story about what another young person has done, I do it in hope that they'll be encouraged and inspired to do the same, but also, that it'll seem that bit more attainable, and ultimately, normal, to let your faith show in everyday life at school.

Whether it's the story of Sam and his friends from Derby putting up that posters of themselves with the words "We're all Christians, ask us why!" in their college, resulting in over 100 conversations about faith in just a week, or the girl group in Nottingham who put up hearts with Christian messages all over the school on Valentine's Day. My hope is that these stories can help re-shape Christian culture and make it normal to talk about faith again.

▶ Make It About Them

Before you get worried and say "But, it's not about them!", I'll get to that shortly. But, young people do want to make their lives count, and they want to be part of something, and there's plenty of people out there looking to recruit young people to their cause. As youth leaders, let's give them something to live for. When we involve them in the mission to reach their generation and we move from simply leading them to leading with them, and we go from reaching out to them to reaching out with them, we engage them in something that matters. We make it about them too, not just about us and our organisations, or about those we're reaching out to, but about them. That's got to be a good thing.

▶ Make It About Others

I strongly believe that everything God does for us as Christians isn't just for us, but also for someone else. He reveals, teaches, blesses, heals, and ultimately saves us for our sakes, yes, but also so that we can then pass it on and live it out amongst the people He's placed around us. Everything He does in our lives can be shared and used to reflect His glory.

As youth workers, it's our job to help our young people to realise this. They're not called to be what I like to call "Just-me-and-God" Christians, but to be "Me-God-and-someone-else" Christians. We need to encourage them to sit with that loner on the bus tomorrow. Stand up for the girl in college everyone's been bullying for so long. Send someone a text, give their classmates a Bible, or start an outreaching CU in their schools and to help them make it work. When they shift the focus of their faith from "What's in it for me?" to "What's in it for those around me?" we set them up for a life that revolves around the command to love our neighbours and not just ourselves. A life of serving and giving and living for others.

I believe that if we're going to make a serious impact for the Kingdom of God, we need to stand together across the Church and join forces where we can and cheer each other on where we can't. I think God's bringing ordinary people together and creating a movement that will change the course of the country and impact the society of tomorrow by impacting it's schools today. But it will require everyone's commitment, from the parent to the youth leader, and from the teacher to the chaplain, and not least, the young people themselves, who are sometimes the forgotten schools workers who perhaps need the most support and cheering on of all.

Whoever you are, if you're influencing young people, you are a schools worker, so be intentional about it and make it count.