

BIBLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Overview

The reason this journey was embarked upon came out of a need to raise Biblical literacy. Schools in the Waikato and Bay of Plenty have noted a general trend toward the lowering of Biblical knowledge and conceptual awareness, and this is in spite of attendance in Christian schooling and church Sunday Schools. This has been borne out through testing based on content taught at school and content that we would generally expect students to know anyway as a result of home and Sunday School input.

Here's what we suspect:

1. Many (but not all) parents are no longer inputting into their children biblically as Christian families may have done once in the past. This could be because of three reasons; (i) with both parents working longer hours there may be less family contact time, (ii) parents own Biblical knowledge is lowering and this is not helped by many churches lowering their expositional teaching aiming at a more topic based and exciting church experience, and (iii) parents abdicating their responsibilities hoping the church and school will make up for any of their own inadequacies. Parents have their children for the greatest amount of time and have the Biblical responsibility to raise their children in Christ. Deuteronomy 11:18 – 21 says, *“Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, like the days of the heavens above the earth.”* Schools, however, have students for some of the best learning times of the week.
2. Some churches are not sure how to create effective children's ministries with some not having the resourcing, perhaps not seeing this area as a key priority, or not actually having the people to be able to offer programmes. As a result Sunday School and youth group programmes can be superficial, entertainment based, and not effectively run because they are unable to use the best people possible. We must realise too that the church does only get to have access to children for a few hours per week.
3. Often Christian School's have not been as effective as most of us have hoped they would be at raising Biblical literacy. While there are definitely success stories, I suspect many schools have not always felt as capable as they have wanted to in being able to create powerful and effective programmes. This may be because other curriculum areas, especially those where the government creates a lot of pressure, end up being focussed on, teachers end up tackling other curriculum areas to get these right first because these are the areas they are trained in, teachers have not felt as confident in teaching Bible, and schools have had very limited help in the development of these areas. Having said this there is evidence of good things happening too.

So what has worked?

- We know teachers with excellent Biblical knowledge make a huge difference. Likewise those teachers with strong relational skills make a difference too. Secular research carried out in general subject areas testifies that this should be expected (Nuthall, 2007).
- Those schools that run missions programmes believe that the practical work of putting into practise what has been learned in theory makes students faith come alive, become real, and shifts their Biblical thinking.
- Using teachers strengths to teach particular Bible topics and rotating groups through this has been successful in many areas. The same approach has been used in assemblies.

So what can we do about this? What needs to change, and what ideas do teachers have for what effective teaching pedagogy in Bible should look like?

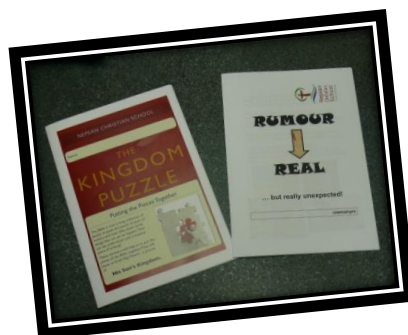
Scripture Memorisation

- Scripture memorisation seems to be more effective when done in passages rather than verses, though there may still be a place for both, for example; when studying a theme like truthfulness or respect.
- Great success has been experienced where teachers use the memory verse in song. There are many available online that have been made into very short songs, particularly to the NIV version.
- We should find passages that we believe are core to a student's faith. Bob Johnston, who heads the Australian Christian Schools Association, believes John 1 and Hebrews 1 fit this. Colossians 1 too?
- One thought is to learn the Scripture first, then study it. This would need to be tested to verify its potential.

- Another is as the late Dave Hunt did. He learned His Bible well. He did not do this through memory verses though. He said there is a difference between memory and memorisation. From early childhood his family shared Scripture every morning and every evening. They shared and talked through this and experienced the Scripture – what this meant for them and the relevance of the passage. This formed memory for him in much the same way as we can remember parts from movies, because we have experienced them.
- Is there a place for critical thinking around scripture memorisation to help reinforce its meaning and importance, particularly when dealing with a theme as above? Bloom’s Taxonomy or Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences could add value to both critical thinking and individual learning styles (although Multiple Intelligences are not meant to be promoted as learning styles, it could work as such in this case).
- There is a belief by some that Juniors are equally as good at learning memory verses as older students. Therefore, under this premise, they should have the same expectations. Some schools are doing this successfully.
- There is a part of the brain that deals with rote learning. When used regularly, like any exercised muscle, it increases in capacity. Such skills as Scripture memorisation and learning times tables activates and develops this.
- An interesting question is that if we value memory verses, why do they not seem to be a feature of the curriculum after Year 8? And Australia doesn’t seem to use them at all (in the schools I asked).

Mentoring

- In New South Wales, Nepean Christian School employed an interesting approach; every staff member (caretaker and office staff included) spent time with a group of six students from Year 7 up once per week for around 15 minutes. It was up to the adult what the time was used for but the general approach was over the year to involve some sort of biblical teaching, relationship building and a forum by which students could feel comfortable enough to ask the tricky God questions. In the case of the principal, he retained the same group of boys all the way through their College years. While many times they played games together, there was still an element of devotion or learning each time (the principal had developed a series based on the book of Ephesians for his students. He had rewritten this short book for them from his point of view). This time together seems to be an excellent way to develop lasting relationships between a group and mentoring opportunities that could go well beyond the schooling years.



Art

- One Year 5 – 6 class regularly uses Visual Art to creatively express their faith. I didn’t get to talk to this teacher and still hope to do so yet. Those teachers that are passionate and skilful with art could have the opportunity of exploring this further. Some schools visited have certainly taken the opportunity to use student murals around the school.¹

Years 1 – 3

- It would be worth experimenting to see if the Year 1 -3 programme could benefit from focussing on the key Bible stories that overview key God concepts. The trick will be to establish the depth this needs to go to in order to give students a grounding without being too weak. An overview would need to be developed by which students could hang each story. CBM camps apparently work on this same principle and may be worth looking into – they develop the key Bible stories over the years children are eligible for their camps.

Years 4 – 6

- Max Ander's book '*30 Days to Learning the Bible*' may offer a framework by which we could teach students how to read the Bible. This seems to be a weakness in students so that they can build upon concepts and values. Teaching students how to read the Bible seems to be what many Australian schools are focussing on. My thought is this could become something developed in Years 4 – 6 (maybe repeated in each of these years).



Years 7 – 8

- At Year 7/8 it would be worth experimenting with developing a Bible course that starts at these years and builds toward a qualification over time. Using the Koinonia Institute programmes our principal's group have been trialling, we could experiment with trialling the Bronze level courses in the Intermediate years. The courses could be rewritten and adapted to take either one week or two per session, and different content developed or taken out as necessary. We could try an Old Testament Survey and Spiritual Disciplines in one year, and a New Testament Survey and Bible Prophecies in the other. Other matter, especially around Spiritual Disciplines could be swapped out, for example; some of Donald Whitney's material on Spiritual Disciplines could be trialled. Using a variety of presenters, short YouTube clips could be filmed to present elements of each session to add variety. The classroom teacher would teach the rest of the content which would have the key points outlined. (It can be noted that Dr Chuck Missler has given me permission to redevelop the Spiritual Disciplines course with Ron Matsen and Graham Preston).

Years 9 – 13

- The opportunity exists for this to continue at Years 9 – 13 at the Silver level. While this is only an idea there could be some ongoing benefits. First it would provide in-depth Bible teaching that would grow students, and secondly, it has the potential to promote ongoing Bible development that could go beyond the school years, therefore promoting life-long learning. This might be achieved if any New Zealand Bible Colleges would be willing to accept the Bronze and Silver level courses as credits toward a degree in their institutes (in the U.S. there are two such Bible Colleges that offer such credits with these courses now). If students already had major credits toward such a degree they may be more likely to pursue further study in this area over the years following school to complete a degree in this area. Alternatively, they could always carry on studies independently through the Koinonia Institute (KI).
- Some New Zealand schools have indicated that if these KI courses could be angled to fit NCEA, it could be feasible to use them at High School level.
- Some schools (especially College level schools) have done some good work developing their own curriculum which is largely still under a level of development.
- Dr Ted Boyce believes missions play a significant part in the formalisation of Christian character and literacy for students. It puts into practice what they have learned and makes sense of both 'The Great Commission' and their Christian values. He believes we shouldn't limit the number of missions students are involved in as long as the child is ready for it. I think this is good for older students (although Paeroa Christian School has used this successfully at Years 7 and 8) but needs to be built on the back of a number of years of development of Christian learning.

From Years 1 – 13

- Bob Johnston has developed a 'God's Story' banner that outlines and connects a timeframe with the books of the Bible, the key characters, and key events and concepts. It cannot be understated how worthwhile this resource appears to be. This could be used in each class to help frame the content being taught and link ideas together. Further opportunities for teaching can be drawn from this too, especially to reinforce what is being taught in other areas such as those above. This banner is quite expensive but deserves consideration. It is available through the National Institute of Christian Education (NICE) in Australia.

Teachers

- It would be worth considering using Chris Parker of the Australian National Institute of Christian Education to run his one day course on the introduction to Christian education to new staff and Board members between schools. This would help people to understand the role of Christian education and help develop the mindset they need to have to make it effective. My suggestion is that a group go over to Sydney to trial this day and see whether there is a role for this to be run each year in New Zealand. Alternatively, if NICE were willing to allow it to happen, a New Zealand principal could be trained to run this each year. (After presenting this idea to the Central North Island Christian principal's group there was a desire to see if anyone in New Zealand was able to present such material, for example; through Laidlaw College or Bethlehem Tertiary Institute (BTI). It may be that such a person accompanies us on a trip to Sydney to trial Chris Parker's work and see if it can be matched in New Zealand).
- In cooperation with Koinonia Institute we have been developing a potential Bible teaching diploma for Christian teachers to take part in. This incorporates the current bronze level courses as 100 level papers, and some specified silver level courses as 200 level papers. Some papers, and an annual Christian worldview lecture by New Zealand and Australian presenters, are being developed specifically for this diploma.
- Further notes are being developed from research reports and books on the development of effective pedagogy and the development of teacher professional development. These notes are available here and provide clear guidance and implications for raising Biblical literacy in our schools.

ⁱ Interestingly one retired Anglican pastor's home I visited had tiled an exterior feature wall of his house with glazed tiles of all the line illustrations of the Good News Bible. It looked very effective and made you stop and explore.

