

"An investigation of the teaching of Scripture to upper primary students in a cross-section of South Australian Catholic primary schools"

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INTRODUCTION

Scripture is one of the bases of the Christian and Catholic Tradition. It therefore is an important aspect of any Religious Education programme within this Tradition. The question driving this investigation concerns the level of education that is occurring in this area. Therefore, the nature of this investigation is to explore the teaching of Scripture in the Religious Education programme, to upper primary students in Catholic schools. More specifically, this research is *'An investigation of the teaching of Scripture to upper primary students in a cross-section of South Australian Catholic primary schools.'*

The results of this investigation shed light on some significant issues. Firstly, in regard to the education of participants, the specific courses being undertaken and how this education affected all aspects of their work with Scripture. Most obviously the affect of education was reflected in the confidence levels of participants in using Scripture. The Scripture passages being used by the participants of this investigation reflected the use of both the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures in these upper primary classes and, the particular books and passages being used with students. Another significant issue was the aspects of Scripture being taught to students and how Scripture was incorporated into the Religious Education programme. Finally, the problems with using Scripture and the educational needs, expressed by participants, give specific knowledge about the needs in the area of Scripture teaching, particularly in relation to education.

This investigation is of interest to the University of South Australia and the Catholic Education Office. It provides information about the education needs of teachers in South Australian Catholic primary schools. It discusses the value of education as a whole and specifically relates information to individual courses currently offered. The pre-service and in-service education needs of the participants of this research provides an insight into possible ways to develop the current Religious Education being offered.

Religious Education Co-ordinators and teachers in Catholic primary schools will find this investigation useful as it highlights the value of on-going education in this area. It also looks at the role of the school as the main source for gathering useful resources and furthering the Scripture education of teachers.

For leaders in Catholic schools this investigation again demonstrates the value of on-going Religious Education for the members of their staff and suggests where this education can be obtained.

METHODOLOGY

My main instrument was a questionnaire that I adapted from Barbara Stead's unpublished thesis *The influence of critical biblical study on the teaching and use of scripture in Catholic primary schools of Victoria*. The questionnaire consisted of multiply choice, likert scale, yes/no and some open-ended questions. This was sent to volunteer participants of the investigation. The participants taught Religious Education to an upper primary class (years 5-7).

The questionnaire gathered information on the participants, their class and their school. Information on teacher's confidence in using Scripture with children and variables affecting this was also gathered. Education played an important role here, as it did throughout all of the results of this investigation. Furthermore, participants gave information about the various aspects of Scripture being taught and their reasons for teaching Scripture to their class. This involved listing resources that they found useful for both the students and themselves as well as successful methods of teaching and communicating Scripture to children. Participants were asked to list a number of Scripture texts that they had recently used with their students. They also completed a detailed question examining their aims for using one of these Scripture passages and, the resources and methods they used in teaching this passage. Finally, this investigation gathered information about problems participants experience in teaching Scripture and educational needs that they saw in both pre-service and in-service education.

To analyse the data collected I used frequencies and percentages. I used the data base I created to calculate the frequencies within the data. For example, for question 1 (the age group of participants) 10 out of 48 respondents answered 4 (31-40 years). Therefore, 21% of respondents are 31-40 years of age.

I also used cross tabulation which involved comparing information from a number of variables to draw results. For example, finding out how the education of teachers affects their confidence in using Scripture with children. This method found that participants with diplomas or degrees had the highest percentage of confidence.

Finally, I used comparisons of means, a similar method to cross tabulations that aims to compare the average scores within the data. For example, comparing the average confidence rating of those with less years of teaching experience to those with more years of teaching experience. This showed that those who had been teaching for 1-5 years had a lower confidence average than those who had been teaching for 21+ years.

RESULTS

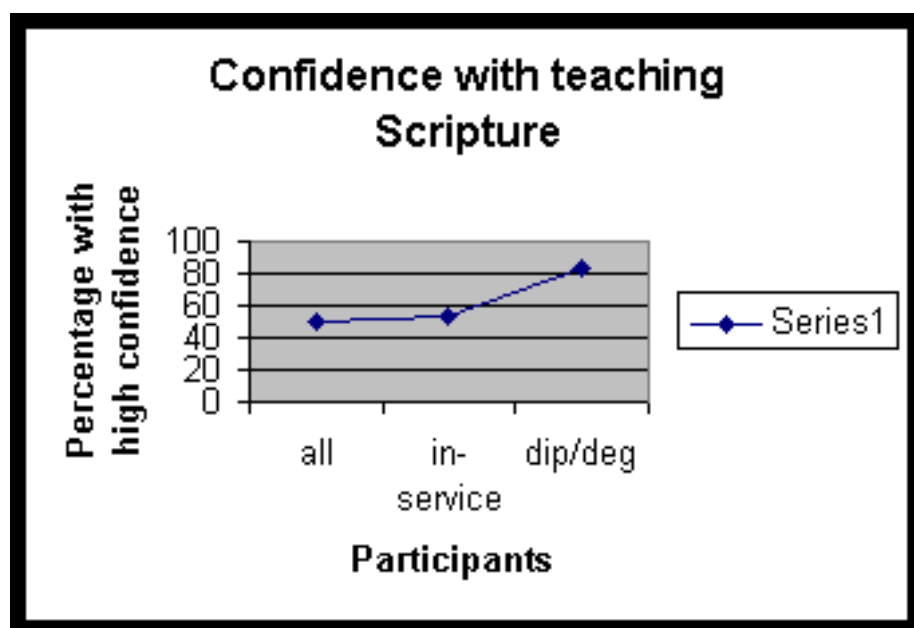
A general conclusion from this investigation is that teachers *are* teaching Scripture to their upper primary students. Not only are they teaching it but they are using critical interpretive methods to do so. Teachers are giving students a sound base for working with Scripture and are generally using excellent resources with their students. This research has found that teachers are gaining education in this area (with 93.8% having completed in-service education and 12.5% diplomas or degrees) and that the majority are interested and enthusiastic about this area of Religious Education.

It is important to mention here that the participants in this study were volunteers. In the initial process of gaining participants for the investigation over 120 teachers were approached, 110 information letters sent out, 73 people consenting to participant with 48 questionnaires

eventually being received. With 45.9% of participants rating their confidence, as moderate and a further 50% having medium to high levels of confidence it is obvious that this group of teachers feel confident in their use of Scripture with children. It seems therefore, that because the majority of people who finally completed the questionnaire felt confident with their knowledge and the teaching of Scripture, they also felt able to complete the research questionnaire and participate in the investigation. With a more random selection of participants there could have been a wider variety of responses. I will draw on this implication throughout the conclusion.

It was clear from this research that the participants are committed to teaching Scripture to their students. Their commitment is demonstrated through the education that they have completed (with 93.8% of participants having completed some form of education in this area), also with Scriptures being used at least once, if not twice a week with students in a critical way, as is demonstrated by the type of teaching occurring.

These teachers' commitment to this area of Religious Education can further be supported by the additional comments made by participants on the questionnaires. They responded that they see Scripture as an important aspect for their Religious Education programme and in the students' learning. Making it relevant to students was important to teachers and it was also commented that teachers need education to gain knowledge and confidence in using Scripture with children.



However, as the results show, even in this select group education plays a major role in the confidence of teachers with 83% of those who had completed a diploma or degree reporting medium to high levels of confidence. In addition 54% of those who completed in-service education also reported medium to high levels of confidence. Overall, both of these groups had a higher confidence level than the entire population of participants in this research with only 45.9% rating their confidence level as medium to high.

This would suggest that if compared with a wider population of teachers, of whom more will have less education, a greater number of participants would rate their levels of confidence in the lower range. With a greater number of teachers rating their levels of confidence in the lower range education would be seen as an even more substantial influence on the confidence of those who had completed it. The correlation between education and confidence reflects the findings of Barbara Stead in her study *The influence of critical biblical*

study on the teaching and use of Scripture in Catholic primary schools of Victoria. She also found that the majority of teachers who had completed more than the compulsory accreditation had a higher level of confidence in using Scripture (Stead, 1995, 173).

Results indicated that participants were teaching Scripture in a critical way. This is evident in the high percentage of people who are teaching the Bible as literature (77.1%). Through this they are mainly teaching about the Bible as a library of books and using critical literacy skills when working with the Biblical texts.

What was taught	% of participants (N = 48)	
The Bible as a library of books	60.4	(n = 29)
Genres within the Bible	54.2	(n = 26)
Drawn a link between critical literacy and the Biblical texts	56.3	(n = 27)
The religious meaning of the text communicated through the genre	45.8	(n = 22)
Other	4.2	(n = 2)

Table 21: What is being taught about the Bible as literature

This shows use of the literary analysis method of interpretation mentioned in the literature review.

Historical aspects of the Bible are also taught by a high percentage of participants (85.4%). Drawing parallels between stories in the Gospels and teaching about the Gospel authors are the main aspects being covered.

What is being taught	% of participants (N = 48)	
The authors of the Gospels	70.8	(n = 34)
The formation of the Gospels	50	(n = 24)
The communities of the Gospel writers (their intended audience)	66.6	(n = 32)
The religious meaning of text, as opposed to scientific or historical fact	58.3	(n = 28)

Drawn parallels between stories in the Gospels	75	(n = 36)
Drawn parallels between the Hebrew Scripture stories and the Christian Scripture stories	25	(n = 36)
Other	4.2	(n = 2)

Table 22: What is being taught about the historical aspects of the Bible

Here historical-critical methods and literary analysis is evident.

Teaching about society at the time of Jesus and the land where Jesus lived and worked, again rates highly with participants (81.3%) and shows some evidence of historical-critical and human science methods of interpretations being used with students. The subject matter being taught suggests that teachers have most confidence with the Christian Scriptures, the geographical aspects of the land and society of Jesus and the historical aspects of the community of the Gospel writers.

What is being taught	% of participants (N = 48)	
Information about Judaism	33.3	(n = 16)
Information about Jewish culture and history	47.9	(n = 23)
The land (geography) where Jesus lived and worked	68.8	(n = 33)
Society at the time of Jesus	75	(n = 36)
Other	2.1	(n = 1)

Table 23: What is being taught about the geographical and social conditions of Jesus' time

This confidence could be due to the education that participants have completed and the excellent resources that are available for both students and teachers with information about these aspects of the text.

However, the results indicate that the Hebrew Scriptures are only being used minimally by the participants. Also there is a low percentage of participants teaching the religious culture of Jesus, that is the Jewish culture and Judaism. This is again reflected in the Scripture texts used by participants, with 81.3% being from the Christian Scriptures and 18.7% from the Hebrew Scriptures. The group of participants are, as I have mentioned, people who generally feel confident enough with their use of Scripture and have completed a variety of units in Religious Education. If this group of South Australian teachers makes minimal use of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is important to ask what might be happening in the wider population of teachers who have less confidence and education in this area?

The Scripture texts most used by participants in this research were the same as those favoured by the participants in Barbara Stead's Victorian study (Stead, 1995, p186). Both studies have found that the Gospels of Luke (37%) and Matthew (32.2%) are the most used books of the Bible and that the Hebrew Scriptures (18.7%) are not often used. Further, out of the top twenty passages used by Stead's participants, eleven were also mentioned in the top twenty texts used by participants of this research. The remaining nine passages identified by participants in this research were the passion and resurrection narratives. Stead did not find a significant emphasis on such texts. This discrepancy with Stead's study could be due to the timing of the research (this research was completed just after Easter, this explaining the number of passion narrative texts mentioned).

Passage Number	Passage Description	% of participants
Acts 2:1-17	Pentecost	4.1 (n = 9)
Genesis 1:1-2:4a	First account of Creation	3.7 (n = 8)
Luke 22-23	Passion of Jesus	3.2 (n = 7)
Luke 15:11-32	Prodigal Son/ Lost son	2.7 (n = 6)
Luke 10:25-37	Parable of the Good Samaritan	2.7 (n = 6)
Matthew 26:17-21, 26-30	Preparation for the Passover & The Last Supper	1.8 (n = 4)
Matthew 5:1-19	The Beatitudes	1.8 (n = 4)
Luke 24:1-12	After the Resurrection	1.8 (n = 4)
John 4:1-42	Jesus speaks to Samaritan woman	1.8 (n = 4)
Matthew 28:1-10	The resurrection	1.4 (n = 3)
Matthew 18:10-14	The Lost Sheep	1.4 (n = 3)
Matthew 14:13-21	Feeding of the five thousand	1.4 (n = 3)
Luke 6:31-42	Treat others as yourself	1.4 (n = 3)
Luke 24:13-35	The road to Emmaus	1.4 (n = 3)
John 19:17-27	Crucifixion	1.4 (n = 3)
John 20:1-18	Resurrection	1.4 (n = 3)
Exodus 3:1-22	God remembers Israel, the burning bush, the mission of Moses, the divine name revealed, Moses instructed for his mission,	1.4 (n = 3)

	the Egyptians to be plundered	
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Table 28: Passages used by participants

This research found that participants were using these Scripture passages firstly, because they were appropriate to a theme and secondly, because they were suggested by the Melbourne Guidelines. The Melbourne Guidelines have a thematic approach to Religious Education and have suggested Scripture passages to support the separate themes of these guidelines. The results found in this research would suggest that participants are choosing Scripture passages to suit the themes outlined in the Melbourne Guidelines. As this was also the conclusion of Stead in her study (Stead, 1995, p195), it is one explanation for the number of similar passages mentioned in both studies. Another reason for these coherences is the familiarity of participants with these texts. The passages mentioned are among those well known by the general Christian population and this could, therefore, explain why both groups of participants chose to use these passages.

The use of isolated pieces of Scripture suggests that there is a fragmented approach to Scripture teaching occurring. Scripture passages are being taken out of their context and used to support the broader Religious Education theme being taught. An alternative way to explore Scripture is by taking a piece of Scripture, interpreting it using the interpretive methods discussed in chapter two and then building a unit of work to fit the meaning of the text. Scripture is not being taught as a unit in itself but rather is being adapted to previously developed themes. This is evident through the low percentage of participants who responded that they taught either the Bible as literature, the historical aspects of the Bible or the geographical and social context of the Bible as units in themselves. If they are not being taught as units in themselves it can be presumed that these critical methods are being used in isolation when appropriate with a passage of Scripture. Also, there was only one participant who indicated that they had given students an in depth study of one Gospel. There is a danger in using Scripture to suit a theme without giving students an understanding of a book as a whole piece of work. Scripture, taken out of context can be misunderstood.

The problems that participants rated highly in their responses were discovering a connection between Scripture and life, finding translations with language appropriate for students and the literal interpretation of Scripture by students. These problems relate to the discussion in the literature review revolving around the Bible being an adult book, the developmental age of the children involved and their literal interpretation of texts. It was argued in the literature review that the Bible is still relevant to children even though it was a book written for adults and that their literal interpretation is a starting point for critical study. The boundaries that this may place on this group of students can be overcome through critical examination of the text with the guidance of the teacher.

It is interesting that participants are finding it a problem relating Scripture to life. It was unclear in this research why this was so. It would have been beneficial to further examine this result to explore the reasons for this problem however, the limitations of this research did not allow for this.

The needs expressed by participants in this research relate to the problems that they are experiencing with teaching Scripture to children. Teachers see a need for more theological background to the Bible and information about the intentions of the Gospel writers. They are seeking direction with their choice of passages appropriate for students and the resources that are available and suitable. It is important that these needs are understood by those who are programming pre-service and in-service education so that they can be addressed and

teachers can gain greater knowledge and confidence in this area of their teaching. The needs expressed by participants again show their desire to use Scripture with students and to help them to come to a deeper meaning of these texts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Education of teachers

The findings of this research suggest that educating teachers in the area of Scripture and Scripture teaching to children is a vital task in giving our students an adequate Religious Education.

At present there are pre-service units of study being offered at the University of South Australia, Underdale campus. This initiative is giving the opportunity for up and coming teachers to begin the education that they need. There are limitations to the amount of in depth study that can be achieved in pre-service units and the Scripture unit that is covered as part of this award is only a beginning point for future education. There are also the already established diplomas or degrees for those who wish to undertake them which offer a comprehensive study in this area. However, as most teachers are seeking education as an in-service experience it is here that opportunities for comprehensive education in the area of Scripture and Scripture teaching is needed. Further more, it is of great necessity to have *all* teachers in Catholic schools completing education in the area of Scripture teaching. The compulsory Accreditation B Scripture unit is a beginning point but there is a strong need for teachers to participate in on-going and more comprehensive education in this area to ensure that our students are not receiving fundamentalist or minimalist education in Scripture.

Education of Students

It is the recommendation of this research that students be given an education with Scripture that promotes using critical interpretive methods. This involves students studying the text as a coherent narrative using methods that explore the text in relation to its literary, historical, geographical and social aspects by using the historical-critical, literary analysis and social science methods of interpretation.

There is also a need for the texts to be related to students' contemporary lives. This is achieved through guiding students beyond a literal interpretation of the text to an understanding of the underlying meaning and the relevance of the text for its original audience and in today's society. This means that critical literacy skills already developed in these students need to be used when looking at the Scriptures.

The Jewish culture that Jesus lived in and Judaism (his religion) also need to be explored in more depth for students to gain a greater understanding about the meaning in the texts. Although this age group would not be expected to do detailed study with the Hebrew Scripture there is a need for more use of the Hebrew Scriptures. Through studying the Hebrew Scriptures students gain background information to the content of the Christian Scriptures and therefore, their understanding of these Scriptures is enhanced.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored a number of aspects of the practise of Scripture teaching to upper primary students in South Australian Catholic primary schools. It has shown a group of teachers who are committed to teaching Scripture to their students, using critical interpretive methods in doing this. These participants have gained education in this area of Religious Education and the value of this education is evident in their confidence, their teaching practise and their commitment to using these texts with students.

This research has raised concerns about the limited amount of Hebrew Scriptures and the religious culture of Jesus being taught to the students. It has also raised concerns about the use of Scripture in the Melbourne Guidelines to support a thematical approach to Religious Education. The research has highlighted the potential danger in removing Scripture from its context and fitting it to these themes.

The value of education is the most important conclusion that has been drawn from this investigation. The impact of education can be clearly seen with these participants, as can the affect of more comprehensive education in this field. Therefore, it is the suggestion of this research that there is great value and a need for on-going education in the area of Scripture and Scripture teaching for teachers in Catholic schools.

Once teachers are confident in their use and knowledge of Scripture and the interpretive methods used when working with these texts, Scripture will become a more comprehensive and in depth part of their Religious Education programmes.