"The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh 8:10):
an evaluation of the Bible Explorer Programme

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Abstract for RBT

Bible Explorer (BX) is a non-denominational, non-confessional and non-conversionary programme specifically designed to assist British primary schools in the fulfilment of their Locally Agreed Syllabus on religious education. The aim of BX is to teach pupils in Key Stage 2 (school years 5 and 6) the storyline of the Bible. Children are taught a set of keywords and hand signs to help them remember the overarching narrative of both the Old and New Testaments and to place people and events in the correct biblical order. Lessons are not scripted but the keywords provide a framework for each session. The delivery method is lively and fast-paced, using storytelling, drama and multi-media presentations to engage the children.

The evaluation of the Bible Explorer programme took the form of a case study, using different research methods. There were three data sources: the feedback forms returned by schools after completion of the programme; a series of semi-structured interviews with current BX presenters; and a survey, open to all BXers, which was advertised on the BX website and via email. The dual use of quantitative and qualitative data provided a rich description of Bible Explorer, and reinforced the validity of the conclusions reached.

It is clear that Bible Explorer is highly regarded by the teachers and children who experience the programme. It has survived for 30 years, growing steadily; today, more than half a million pupils in both faith and community schools have participated in the scheme. Much of the programme's success derives from the material it presents and the method by which this is delivered in the classroom. In its own small and specific way, Bible Explorer demonstrates the range of possibilities inherent in story and story-telling, As such, it offers both encouragement and challenge to the wider church community.

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"… the Levites helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites, who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then Ezra said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved , for the joy of the LORD is your strength.' So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. (Neh 8: 7-12, NRSV)

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
BJRE	British Journal of Religious Education
BX	Bible Explorer
IJER	International Journal of Education and Religion
IJSSR	International Journal of Sociology and Social Research
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Soc. Indic. Res.	Social Indicators Research
WTB Ministries	Walk through the Bible Ministries

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Bible Explorer (BX) programme is an oddity. It has survived for more than thirty years in an educational environment that is, at worst, hostile to the teaching of Christianity[1]. It is not an exact fit with the dominant pedagogical models of religious education[2] and yet it has steadily increased its area of activity. Designed by a Christian charity, it is taught in more community schools than faith schools, and harnesses passionately committed Christians to deliver a non-confessional course. Some areas include the programme in their Locally Agreed Syllabus, but many others do not. Children as young as nine years old are introduced to stories that are arguably unsuitable for primary school pupils[3]. Although designed as an educational programme, BX taps into the resurgence of enthusiasm for storytelling[4]. In addition, Bible Explorer remains little known, although it has now reached more than half a million children. It is an intriguing subject for research. Might it provide useful insights into the teaching of religion at Key Stage 2 and beyond?

What is Bible Explorer?

Bible Explorer comes under the aegis of Walk Thru the Bible (WTB) Ministries, an international charity founded in the United States in 1976 by Bruce Wilkinson and now operating in more than 100 countries. The organisation's faith statement locates the charity within the evangelical tradition. The mission of WTB Ministries "is to set people up for an encounter with God, to connect them with His heart and open their ears to His voice... igniting a passion for His Word is a vital part of that mission."[5] The charity partners with local churches around the world, providing teaching, resources and training to pastors, church leaders and congregations: "we are committed to serving the whole body of Christ across denominational, cultural and national lines".[6] In the United Kingdom, WTB Ministries was

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[1] Terence Copley, *Indoctrination, Education and God: the Struggle for the Mind* (London: SPCK, 2005) and Penny Thompson, *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2004).

[2] Michael Grimmitt, ed., *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (Essex: McCrimmons, 2000), Chapter 2.

[3] Ronald Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (New York, Seabury Press, 1968).

[4] www.sfs.org.uk. The Society for Storytelling supports and promotes oral storytelling across the UK.

[5] http://www.walkthru.org/our-mission. Accessed 3/12/2014.

[6] http://www.walkthru.org/our-beliefs. Accessed 3/12/2014.

registered with the Charity Commission on 1st June 1988 and now operates throughout the British Isles.

The Bible Explorer programme was specifically designed to assist British schools "in the fulfilment of their locally agreed syllabus on religious education"[7] and is "non-denominational, non-confessional and non-conversionary"[8]. The BX website comments:

> Who else is going to teach the Bible to this generation in a positive way? We love bringing the Bible to life for children across the UK. We understand it's hard for teachers to impart good knowledge for every subject. We love to support them by freely sharing our Bible expertise![9]

Bible Explorer was launched on 27th July 1984 and, by the end of July 2015, 581,015 British school children had experienced the programme. The aim of BX is to teach pupils in Key Stage 2 (school years 5 and 6) the storyline of the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments are covered. Generally, the Old Testament is taught to Year 5 children (9 – 10 years old) in a series of five one-hour lessons; Year 6 pupils (10 – 11 years old) study the New Testament, also over a five week period, with classes again lasting an hour[10]. The course covers not only the major people, places and events of the two Testaments but also highlights the journeys of key characters, setting the biblical material within its geographical and historical context. The keynote of the course is "fun"[11], with the aim of making pupils "excited about the most amazing book of all time."[12] The delivery method is lively and fast-paced, using storytelling, drama and multi-media presentations to engage the children. According to the training manual, "it's difficult to be too energetic, enthusiastic or friendly"[13]. BXers are also advised to "vary your presentation as much as you can"[14]. The format is designed to appeal to a range of learning types (audio, visual and kinaesthetic) and presenters draw on their own particular interests and skills to bring each session to life.

The Bible Explorer programme is careful to teach only what is in the Bible, without promoting a particular Christian denomination or a particular translation of the text. Doctrinal issues are not included in any of the lessons and presenters are required to use "the utmost

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[7] http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Showcharity/RegisterOfCharities. Accessed 11/03/2013.
[8] http://www.bible.org.uk/child_events_what.php Accessed 17/10/2014.
[9] http://www.bible.org.uk/child_events_why.php Accessed on 17/10/2014
[10] The lesson plans for both the Old and New Testament courses are given in Appendix 1.
[11] http://www.bible.org.uk/child_events_what.php Accessed on 17/10/2014
[12] http://www.bible.org.uk/child_events_what.php Accessed 17/10/2014
[13] Walk through the Bible Ministries, *Bible Explorer Old Testament Regional Trainee Manual* (rev. ed.; Beaumont, Essex: WTB Ministries, 2009), p.36.
[14] *BX OT Manual*, p.55

discretion and care"[15] when dealing with any questions of doctrine that may arise. Indeed, presenters are discouraged not only from sharing their personal opinions but also from becoming involved in difficult or divisive issues[16]. In particular, a BXer should "never criticise any denominations or other religions"[17]. The focus of each lesson is firmly on what the Bible says. Presenters are advised to "read your Bible from front to back regularly. This is the best way to make sure you stick to the story". Children are taught a set of keywords and hand signs to help them remember the overarching narrative of the Bible and to place people and events in the correct biblical order. Lessons are not scripted, but the key words provide a framework for each session. Within this structure, BXers are free to tell the stories as they wish. A booklet of activities accompanies both the Old and New Testament programmes, with worksheets to complement each lesson. These are generally emailed to schools in advance of the first session, although it remains the responsibility of the presenter to ensure that each child has access to this material.

Who teaches Bible Explorer?

Presenters are not paid by Bible Explorer for teaching the programme, and any expenses incurred must be requested from the school where the sessions are taught. Although most BXers are volunteers, some are employed by churches or other Christian organisations to work in schools. The recruitment page on the Bible Explorer website explains that presenters should have "a God given ability to teach simply, clearly and make it fun"[18], as well as "time to teach during the school day"[19]. Applicants must provide two referees, one of whom is a church leader. Under the terms of engagement, every presenter is required to be "an active member of a local Church which is doctrinally sound in practice and evangelical in activity"[20]. All BX presenters train initially to teach the Old Testament programme. Two types of training are available. The Fast Track training, which is the more expensive option, takes place over four consecutive days and costs £315[21]. Alternatively, individuals may shadow a regional trainer over the 5 weeks that it takes to deliver the course, learning how to present the

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[15] *BX OT Manual*, p.49.
[16] http://www.bible.org.uk/events_what.html Accessed 14/08/2013.
[17] *BX OT Manual*, p.49.
[18] http://www.bible.org.uk/child_events_how.php Accessed 17/10/2014
[19] http://www.bible.org.uk/child_events_how.php Accessed 17/10/2014
[20] *BX OT Manual*, p.51. There is clearly some flexibility about this requirement as I am both a member of the Religious Society of Friends and a BX presenter.
[21] Prices correct as of December 2014.

programme from seeing it in action. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this apprenticeship model provides a particularly enriching and enjoyable experience for trainees. To qualify as an accredited presenter, the trainee BXer must send a video of one of their "live" classes, including a full hand sign review, to the Bible Explorer office. Accreditation may be withdrawn if a presenter fails to meet the required teaching standards; if the policies of Bible Explorer are consistently disregarded; or if the presenter's lifestyle is inconsistent "with the role of Christian ministry"[22]. A "self-check inventory"[23] is included in the training manual. This lists twenty-one statements about personal spiritual practice and attitudes, and invites the presenter to assess their performance on a scale of 1 to 10. A BXer's first year is considered a trial period; presenters are expected to commit to two years of teaching, and to deliver at least six presentations per year. If no classes have been taught for 12 months, the BXer is required to retrain. Presenters only become eligible to train for the New Testament programme after completing a minimum of ten Old Testament presentations.

Each presenter is responsible for managing their own school bookings; in most cases, this includes making the initial contact with a school. Supplies of promotional brochures and letter heads are freely available from the Bible Explorer office. Some areas have a central Co-ordinator, appointed by a local church or educational trust, to oversee the arrangements. Clergy with access to schools in their parish or local area will sometimes recommend the programme, especially if they also present the course themselves. Discussion on the Bible Explorer website suggests that it can be a real challenge for presenters to gain access to local schools. Teachers that have used the programme with their classes are asked if they might consider recommending it to other schools.

Bible Explorer is taught exclusively in schools. Presenters are not allowed to use the teaching materials in other contexts; the training manual notes, accurately, that "this will be a great temptation"[24]. BXers are also requested not to promote other aspects of their ministry in a Bible Explorer lesson. The research data shows that for some clergy, this can be frustrating.

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[22] *BX OT Manual*, p.53.
[23] *BX OT Manual*, p.40. For example, the first statement reads, "I study the Bible on a regular basis"; the final statement is, "I faithfully have a time of soul-searching and cleansing before I teach a Bible Explorer".
[24] *BX OT Manual*, p.47.

Bible Explorer and its educational environment

In Britain, education has always been closely linked with Christianity. As a result, Christian teaching has an important place in schools even today[25]. However, in the early 1960's, religious education (RE) in Britain underwent a profound change: the confessionalism of the past (that is, "teaching that assumed or intended religious commitment on the part of the child"[26]) was no longer considered educationally acceptable in state maintained schools[27]. Some limited support for Christian religious nurture endured, however, at both national and local level. In 1967, for example, the Durham Report, *The Fourth R,* recommended the continued teaching of the "biblical, historical and theological knowledge which forms the cognitive basis of the Christian faith"[28] and ten years later, *Quest,* the locally agreed syllabus for Nottinghamshire, insisted on Christian teaching for all age groups[29]. Nevertheless, when the Bible Explorer programme was launched in July 1984, a multi-faith, phenomenological approach to religious education had effectively dominated classrooms for more than ten years[30]. Four years later, the Education Reform Act, 1988, established the National Curriculum. Religious education was handled separately from other subjects; its foundations had been laid by the 1944 Education Act, and these remained largely unchanged[31]. One key difference, set out in Section 8.3, was the requirement that "an agreed syllabus shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religious traditions represented in Great Britain". A shift in language from religious *instruction* in the 1944 Act to religious *education* in the 1988 Act mirrored the change in teaching style from the earlier Bible- based (but non-denominational) catechesis to a more open non-confessional form[32].

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[25] Brenda Watson and Penny Thompson, *The Effective Teaching of Religious Education* (2nd ed.; Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2007), 54.

[26] Copley, *Indoctrination, Education and God*, 127.

[27] L. Philip Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity: Developing a New Model of Religious Education* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2.

[28] The Durham Commission, *The Fourth R, the Report of the Commission on Religious Education in Schools* (London: SPCK, 1970), 103.

[29] Thompson, *Whatever Happened to RE*? 94-95.

[30] Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity*, chapter 5.

[31] William Kay, "Agreed Syllabuses" in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 58.

[32] Marius Felderhof, "Introduction" in *Teaching Virtue: the Contribution of Religious Education* (eds. Marius Felderhof and Penny Thompson; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5.

Today, RE is often described as a Cinderella[33] subject; beset with controversy and debate, it is unclear how a happy ending to its story might be achieved[34]. The subject is not included in the National Curriculum or the English Baccalaureate and many new Academies and free schools are not legally obliged to tailor their provision of RE to a locally agreed syllabus (although the teaching of RE is still required). The then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, conceded in July 2013 that RE was an "unintended casualty" of recent educational reforms[35]. In the foreword to the RE Review of the same year, Gove noted that RE's place within schools "will be strong if its role and importance are communicated effectively and widely understood."[36] This seems unlikely to happen when "a sense of crisis"[37] is felt by many in the profession and there is evidence of poor quality teaching and learning in schools. Children lack interest in the subject, and religious diversity remains a problem for society rather than a source of enrichment[38].

It would be foolish to hope that Bible Explorer might provide solutions to the wide-ranging problems which currently afflict religious education in the UK. However, the programme usefully reminds us that, in any educational debate, it is essential not to lose sight of "the reality of the classroom"[39]. What works with pupils will always be a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for success. This was recognised in the 2013 REC Review, which stated that "it is important to research, policy and practice in RE that a stronger relationship is fostered between academic work and classroom practice."[40] The school context matters because it shapes the distinctive nature of RE. As a compulsory subject, RE must include and engage pupils from an assortment of backgrounds and across a range of age groups[41].

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[33] Trevor Cooling, "Faith, Religious Education and Whole School Issues" in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 89.
[34] Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity*, Introduction.
[35] The comment was made at an event at Lambeth Palace. It is quoted in Religious Education Council of England and Wales, *A Review of Religious Education in England* (RE Council: October 2013), 8.
[36] REC, *Review*, 5.
[37] REC, *Review,* 8.
[38] Barnes, *Education, Religion, and Diversity*, 1.
[39] Barnes, *Education, Religion, and Diversity*, 4.
[40] REC *Review,* 33.
[41] L. Philip Barnes, "Religious Studies, Religious Education and the Aims of Education", *BJRE* 36 (2015): 195-206.

Bible Explorer and contemporary pedagogical models of RE

Michael Grimmit provides a useful working definition of a pedagogy as "a theory of teaching and learning encompassing aims, curriculum content and methodology"[42]. Acknowledging the close link between these three elements has practical implications. Firstly, an assessment of a programme, such as Bible Explorer, will be incomplete if it fails to take account not only of the content of the programme, but also the outcomes created by that content and the method of delivery[43]. Secondly, the content and delivery method will always reflect certain aims; those aims will be based on a range of assumptions and commitments, whether or not they are explicitly recognised. Watson and Thompson stress the importance of identifying these underlying objectives before evaluating a scheme of work:

> The most impeccable and well-prepared content, and the most exciting and suitable method, will fail as RE unless plugged in to what is its central purpose. Furthermore, if this is really understood, this purpose can be achieved through a great variety of approaches with regard both to content and method. The teacher can adapt almost any and every available item.[44]

Educational aims do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by their cultural context and the expectations of society. Education is therefore "an activity with the potential to preserve or subvert cultural values and one that is never neutral"[45]. Although true for all subjects, this has caused particular problems for RE, where the neutrality of both teacher and syllabus content was identified as a bulwark against the possible religious indoctrination of the nation's children. The perceived need to protect pupils from the dangers of religion can be seen as a "powerful indicator" of the dominance of a secular worldview[46]. Several commentators have noted that secular, rather than religious, indoctrination is already occurring in British schools[47] and that the key debate around tolerance is now focused on the "*freedom to* hold religious views"[48].

In practice, two possibilities are open to RE. A confessional model still exists in faith schools but is seen as inappropriate in other educational contexts, mainly because it is equated with

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[42] Grimmit, *Pedagogies of RE*, 16.
[43] David Aldridge, "Schemes of Work and Lesson Planning" in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 197-198.
[44] Watson and Thompson, *The Effective Teaching of RE*, 10.
[45] Vivienne Baumfield, "Pedagogy" in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 205.
[46] Watson and Thompson, *Effective Teaching of RE,* 29.
[47] Copley, *Indoctrination, Education and God*, xi.
[48] Mark Pike, "Citizenship and Human Rights" in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 112.The emphasis is Pike's.

indoctrination and intolerance towards others. This view is not supported by the existing empirical research[49] but continues to influence policy. Non-confessional models, involving a multi-faith approach, are rooted in liberal or postmodern thinking and have been criticised for promoting relativism, misrepresenting religion and confusing pupils[50]. Against such a background, some voices have argued that "genuine" RE is appropriate only in faith schools: "an RE that merely teaches about religion and does so from an allegedly neutral standpoint is simply not enough and is perhaps not as neutral as is being assumed".[51] This seems a counsel of despair, not least because it implies that the teaching of religious education is based solely on a theological rationale. In the UK, however, the study of religion in schools is justified on educational grounds[52]. The Education Reform Act 1988 requires schools to "promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society"[53]. Felderhof suggests that "the essence of religious education" lies in showing what the unique contribution of religion might be to fostering these dimensions in young people and the wider community[54].

In reality, it is the attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion which bring these debates to life for BXers in the classroom. The phrases reflect Grimmitt's understanding of the dual role of religious education, and were designed to distinguish the subject from religious nurture (in that the goals of RE were educational and not religious) and from religious studies (in that some personal development was expected in RE)[55]. Today, there is widespread and wide-ranging criticism of both terms[56]. For the classroom teacher, the key concern is that "nobody has satisfactorily explained precisely what pupils are expected to 'learn from' religion"[57]. The target is clearly not to proselytize, but rather to encourage children to find something of value in the material for themselves – a process which Copley identifies as "a clear steer towards the secular"[58]. Bible Explorer is keen to emphasise that its presenters should not cross the line that separates education from

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[49] Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity*, 21.
[50] Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity*, Chapter 1.
[51] Elmer Thiessen, "Religious Education and Committed Openness" in *Inspiring Faith in Schools* (ed. Marius Felderhof et al.; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 37.
[52] Barnes and Wright, "Romanticism, representations of religions and critical religious education", *BJRE* 28 (2006): 65-77.
[53] Barnes, "Religious studies, religious education and the aims of education", 205.
[54] Felderhof, "Introduction", 6.
[55] Baumfield, "Pedagogy", 207.
[56] Baumfield, "Pedagogy", 207-208.
[57] Copley, *Indoctrination, Education and God*, 126.
[58] Copley, *Indoctrination, Education and God*, 126.

evangelism, even while recognising that to play down the significance of God in the Bible is to misrepresent Christianity.

Bible Explorer, Education and Evangelism

The distinction between 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion only makes sense if one accepts "that learning about religion can take place in a neutral, objective fashion whereas learning from religion is a subjective activity"[59]. The facts are taught and pupils choose for themselves what they want to believe. But how to choose? And can religion really be reduced to objective facts? As highlighted earlier, teaching is never value-free in this way. Bible Explorer bucks the trend by suggesting that religious commitment is beneficial for understanding and communicating the richness of Christianity. A presenter's knowledge and experience are seen as assets in the classroom and can bring a lesson to life[60], especially if pupils are engaged and the teacher is infectiously enthusiastic about the subject[61]. Astley goes even further and rejects the premise that evangelism is unacceptable in education:

> Secular educators engage daily in what we may surely think of as a form of implicit (general) evangelism, through teaching that leads to the adoption of particular attitudes, values and dispositions – and, of course, beliefs. Education is always in the business of changing belief: not only 'beliefs-that' about the natural and human world, but also 'beliefs-in' that express the trust, commitment and engagement that are essential to both academic pursuits and everyday life…The best sort of education does not just lead the learner to think that here is 'something worth knowing'; the true scholar, scientist and artist is one who in a real sense commits his life to this 'something'. Why is education so often presented, by contrast, as a dispassionate, intellectually tentative activity? [62]

Thiessen, too, notes that teaching "for commitment" is valued in other areas of the curriculum[63]. So, where does this leave the BXer? The Bible Explorer programme is explicitly non-confessional and, in many schools, is taught in a multi-faith environment: BXers are clear that any form of overt Christian evangelism is totally inappropriate. Nevertheless, a presenter is also required to help a class 'learn from' the biblical material presented. It will be interesting to hear how BXers handle this conundrum when faced with the questions of a lively and interested group of ten-year olds.

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[59] Watson and Thompson, *Effective Teaching of RE,* 59.
[60] Jeff Astley, "Will the Real Christianity Please Stand Up?" *BJRE* 15 (1992): 4.
[61] Watson and Thompson, *Effective Teaching of RE,* 3. This is their definition of a good teacher.
[62] Jeff Astley, "Evangelism in Education: Impossibility, Travesty or Necessity?" *IJER* 3 (2002): 186-188.
[63] Thiessen, "RE and Committed Openness", 36,

Bible Explorer and Locally Agreed Syllabuses

The legal and administrative framework which supports the teaching of religious education in the UK has a long and somewhat complicated history.[64] Locally Agreed Syllabuses can vary in quality and style and the 2013 non-statutory national curriculum framework for RE (NCFRE) was designed, in part, to introduce parity with other subjects, and uniformity and coherence across all schools. Although resulting in regional variations, the current requirement to produce a syllabus for RE that has been agreed at local level can bring tangible benefits for both teachers and the local community[65]. In-depth dialogue between sectors is necessary if the committees making up the Agreed Syllabus Conference are to perform well and the requirement for a regular review of the syllabus promotes accountability. In its turn, the democratic consensus which underpins a syllabus bestows a degree of confidence and authority on the teacher who must deliver it in the classroom. This clearly impacts Bible Explorer presenters, who feel more comfortable when the BX programme is explicitly included within their locally agreed syllabus, as it is in Surrey, for example.

Bible Explorer and "Curriculum Christianity"[66]

Although Ronald Goldman's arguments against teaching the Bible to primary school children no longer hold sway, communicating the biblical narrative to young people remains as much a challenge today as it was in the 1960's[67]. There are few opportunities for pupils to handle biblical material for themselves[68]; even if they do, there are hermeneutical obstacles to overcome if the world of the text is to intersect in a meaningful way with the child's own experience. Recent research into children's story Bibles reveals the range of editing and interpretation that takes place when the Bible is presented to young people[69]. In adapting the Bible for children, the first casualty is often "the complexity and diversity that

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[64] William Kay, "Agreed Syllabuses", 52.
[65] M. C. Felderhof, "Afterword" in *Inspiring Faith in Schools* (ed. Marius Felderhof et al.; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 188-190.
[66] Mary Hayward, "Curriculum Christianity", *BJRE,* 28:2 (2006): 153-171.
[67] Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, 5-7.
[68] Hayward, "Curriculum Christianity", 164.
[69] David Shaw, "Telling the Story from the Bible? How Story Bibles Work", *Themelios,* 37:2 (July 2012): 1.

characterize the biblical canon"[70]. The non-denominational approach of the Bible Explorer programme means that the biblical text is followed as closely as possible; this method also reflects the programme's evangelical provenance. Concerns have been raised about the theologically impoverished understanding of Jesus that emerges from many Agreed Syllabuses, especially for younger pupils. As a bare minimum, it is seen as imperative that Jesus is placed within his historical context[71]. Bible Explorer does this well, drawing out the resonances between the Old and New Testaments and clearly identifying Jesus as a Palestinian Jew, living under Roman occupation. The programme also refers in detail to St Paul and the development of the Early Church, another subject area criticised as weak in many Agreed Syllabuses[72]. It seems that BX may have benefited from its outsider status: as it was not tailor-made to fit a specific Locally Agreed Syllabus, it has avoided many of the attendant flaws.

Roger Homan asks whether representations of religion can ever reach the classroom without either distortion or "spin"[73]. In particular, he is concerned that resources produced by faith groups are likely to represent an orthodox and theoretical account of the faith[74]. Astley, too, notes that the content of many Agreed Syllabuses assumes agreement about what is and is not Christian, a position that fails to do justice to the diversity of belief and practice within Christianity[75]. Religions are never static and unchanging "distinct wholes"[76], nor are they closed systems existing outside of time and place[77]. Bible Explorer may be open to criticism on these grounds; certainly many Christians will not share the depth of engagement with the Bible which the BX programme presupposes. The programme is also limited in scope, in that it seeks only to tell children the "big picture" of the Bible. There is no exploration of denominational issues, for example, and no discussion of contemporary ecclesiology. Nevertheless, in the course of the narrative, many of the great themes of Christian faith are revealed.

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[70] Caroline Vander Stichele and Hugh Pyper, "Introduction" in *Text, Image and Otherness in Children's Bibles* (ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Hugh Pyper; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 6.
[71] Karen Walshe and Terence Copley, "The Jesus of Agreed Syllabuses in Key Stage 1 and the Jesus of Theology and Religious Studies", *BJRE,* 24:1 (2001): 37.
[72] Hayward, "Curriculum Christianity", 164-165.
[73] Roger Homan, "Constructing Religion" in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 183-193.
[74] Homan, "Constructing Religion", 186.
[75] Astley, "Will the Real Christianity Please Stand Up?" 9.
[76] Barnes, *Religion, Education and Diversity*, 34.
[77] Hayward, "Curriculum Christianity", 158.

It is important to note the significance of stories and storytelling for the Bible Explorer programme. The biblical narratives, when told in sequence and with an awareness of how the texts work alone and together, provide pupils with a secure framework on which to build their understanding of Christianity. Trevor Cooling comments,

> There is increasing agreement that children can cope with quite difficult ideas as long as they are presented in a way that makes sense in their world of experience. The problem comes when abstract ideas are dumped on children in a manner that takes adult frameworks of thought for granted.[78]

Stories can be a powerful learning tool[79]: effective story-telling allows children to enter a colourful imaginative world, where questions are encouraged and the senses are engaged. Jack Zipes is a passionate advocate for story-telling in schools. He sees the art form as subversive and rooted in community. Zipes usually works with fairy tales, but his manifesto seems particularly appropriate for biblical story-telling:

> The genuine storyteller shares his or her wisdom with the listeners, knows how to listen to the listeners and the environment, and exposes what he or she knows for the benefit of the community. Yet it is not simply the sharing of wisdom that is important. The genuine storyteller must feel the urge to divulge what it means to live in an age when lies often pass for truth in the mass media and the public realm. The storyteller must feel the urge to contrast social reality with a symbolic narrative that exposes contradictions. From this contrast, the storyteller gives birth to light, lightens our lives, and sheds light on the different ways in which we can become our own storytellers.[80]

Zipes does not want a passive audience for his stories, aiming instead to encourage a "critical response and questioning attitude"[81] in the children. This, too, should be the focus of telling Bible stories in school. Leaving children to make sense of these stories on their own puts them at risk of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the text, with potentially damaging consequences[82]. Watson and Thompson recommend that pupils begin to learn the necessary biblical interpretation skills in primary school. They suggest, by way of example, that children should be taught an awareness of genre[83]. This is something that Bible Explorer addresses, particularly through the worksheets, but it may be an area for further development.

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[78] Trevor Cooling, *Concept Cracking: Exploring Christian Beliefs in School* (Nottingham: Stapleford, 1994), 5.
[79] Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: the Science behind the Startling Power of Story* (Westport: Greenwood, 2007), Chapter 1.
[80] Jack Zipes, *Creative Storytelling: Building Community, Changing Lives* (London: Routledge, 1995), 225.
[81] Zipes, *Creative Storytelling*, 58.
[82] Watson and Thompson, *Effective Teaching of RE,* 119.
[83] Watson and Thompson, *Effective Teaching of RE,* 154.

Research Design

Every investigator must start out by establishing which methodology will achieve the specific aims they have in mind. I wanted to produce a rich description of the Bible Explorer programme, looking at how the programme functions and why it seems to work with pupils. There is nothing quite like Bible Explorer, although both 'Godly Play' and 'Open the Book' share some family resemblances. 'Godly Play', for example, utilises "laughter, playfulness and structure" to develop children's religious awareness[84]. However, it is not directed exclusively at school children nor is it designed to support the basic curriculum. Like BX, 'Open the Book' relies on Christian volunteers to go into primary schools, but its aim is to deliver school assemblies rather than to teach RE. Given that BX is one of a kind and a new subject for study, research at this stage must inevitably be descriptive or explorative in form. A case study seemed the most appropriate approach, allowing me to take account of the real-life setting of BX, as it operates in UK schools today. Robert Yin notes that a case study is, in part, defined by the way in which it uses different research methods on the same object of study, employing a process of triangulation to ascertain whether inferences drawn from one set of data are likely to be valid[85]. I was able to access three sources of data: the feedback forms returned by schools after completion of the programme; a series of semi-structured interviews with current BX practitioners; and a survey, open to all BXers, which was advertised on the BX website and via email. Each of these sources involved what might be termed a "research conversation"[86], in that my primary interest was in understanding what people had to say about Bible Explorer, rather than testing a hypothesis. This also applies to the process of creating categories, which drove my analysis of both the survey and the feedback forms:

> Creating categories triggers the construction of a conceptual scheme that suits the data. This scheme helps a researcher to ask questions, to compare across data, to change or drop categories and to make a hierarchical order of them. At its most useful, the process of establishing categories is a very close, intense conversation between a researcher and the data that has implications for ongoing method, descriptive reporting and theory building.[87]

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[84] Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: an Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), xi.

[85] Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (4th edition; Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 18.

[86] David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Press, 2000), 9.

[87] Margot Ely et al, *Doing Qualitative Research: Circles within Circles* (London: The Falmer Press, 1997), 87.

I was conscious that pupils taking part in the BX programme were not given a direct voice in my research and that this could be detrimental to the outcome[88]. However, research with children generates specific ethical issues. It is generally only appropriate if there are no adults available to answer questions or where the children will clearly benefit from their involvement in the research project[89]. Given the age of the children and the issues of power imbalance in a classroom situation[90], I judged that the question on the feedback forms, which asked the teacher to describe her pupils' response to BX, would provide adequate data.

Issues of sampling and the recruitment of respondents, including the problem of non-response bias, are obstacles common to all social scientific research. The support of the Bible Explorer team at the Head Office in Essex was crucial in generating a good level of response to the survey. Not only did BX staff upload the survey onto the website, but they also put me in direct touch with the most active BX presenters and promoted the survey through the monthly Newsletter. I am most grateful to them for their help. As there were no previous surveys of Bible Explorer presenters to accommodate, I designed the questionnaire myself[91], based largely on my experience of teaching the programme. It was piloted with a small number of BXers before being used on a larger scale.

Case studies are often criticised for the extent to which the investigator's 'subjective' judgements are used to collect and analyse data. The dual use of quantitative and qualitative data proved invaluable in helping me to treat the evidence fairly and to consider alternative interpretations. There is a creative tension between the differing contributions of statistical analyses and qualitative data. This is useful not only in stimulating valid conclusions but also in reducing the risk of overlooking relevant factors[92]. Yin reminds us that the final test for judging the quality of any empirical social research is that of reliability. If an investigator conducted my case study again, using the exact procedures I described, would they arrive at the same findings and conclusions as I did? To enable this test to be met, I was careful to attend to all the evidence that had been collected and also to present this evidence

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[88] Gina Crivello, Laura Camfield, Martin Woodhead, "How can Children tell us about their Wellbeing? Exploring the Potential of Participatory Research Approaches with Young Lives" *Soc. Indic. Res.* (2009) 90:51-72.

[89] Catherine Shaw, Louca-Mai Brady and Ciara Davey, *Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People* (London: National Children's Bureau Research Centre, 2011).

[90] John Barker and Susie Weller, "Is it Fun? Developing Children Centred Research Methods" *IJSSR* 23:1 (2003): 33-58.

[91] Pamela Munn and Eric Drever, *Using Questionnaires in Small-Scale Research,* (rev. ed.; Glasgow: The SCRE Centre, 2007).

[92] Yin, *Case Study Research*, Chapter 5.

separately from its interpretation[93]. In the write-up of the data which follows, the material is presented in the order in which it was collected.

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[93] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 126.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The survey consisted of 28 questions. I used three different question types: open questions, with a textbox for comments; multiple choice questions allowing only one answer, with the choices displayed as a drop-down menu; and rating questions, in which the respondents were asked to rate a series of statements based on a 1-5 scale. The survey was launched in June 2013 as an attachment to that month's newsletter, which is emailed by the BX office to all presenters. It was also included as a forum post on the Bible Explorer website[1]. BXers are required to make contact with the office at least once a month, either by logging on to the website or by email. Failure to do so prompts an email reminder. Even if a presenter does visit the website, there is no guarantee that they will also visit the forum. The Walk through the Bible website has four sections open to public access: Adult Events, Bible Store, Bible Tours and Children's Events. The Children's Events webpage focuses on Bible Explorer, with further webpages asking "What is Bible Explorer?", "Why do we teach Bible Explorer?", "Becoming a Presenter" and "Supporting Bible Explorer". These sections give a clear introduction to the BX programme. Visitors to the site can also see where BX is currently being taught. Each presenter is listed, together with the school where they are teaching; the county in which the school is situated; the lesson to be taught; and the number of pupils in the class. From this information, a running total of the number of children taught each week is calculated. The totals for the current academic year and to date are also shown. The BX presenter login is situated on the Children's Events page and is password protected. It is here that presenters update the details of their school bookings, visit the forum to share ideas and chat with other BXers, or download the programme's Powerpoint presentations, worksheets and keyword videos.

Between June and August, there were thirty survey responses from the forum post on the Walk through the Bible website. As there were no further responses in September, I sent a personal email, containing a link to the survey, to the 137 most active BX presenters. "Most active" was defined as those BXers who had logged on to the BX website (but not necessarily the forum) within the previous month. The email addresses were supplied by the Bible Explorer office. This produced a total of twenty two responses from the email invitation and

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[1] www.bible.org.uk/child_events_what.php (Accessed 21 July 2015 at 17.52)

one further response from the BX web link. This gave a total number of fifty three surveys. Of these, two were incomplete and five were left blank, giving a data set of forty eight surveys.

Question 1: Consent

UK data protection legislation requires that individuals give their consent to the processing of their personal information. One respondent declined such consent and so was automatically barred from taking any further part in the survey.

Question 2: What do you enjoy most about teaching BX?

This open question began the survey proper. None of the respondents skipped this question and so there were 48 responses in total. The scope of the replies indicates the variety of enjoyable elements within Bible Explorer. These range from "those exquisite moments when God joins in and surprises us all"[2] to "storytelling"[3] and "developing my own understanding of the Bible"[4]. Thirty four respondents wrote that one of the most enjoyable aspects of teaching the programme was the children's enthusiastic response. There was more agreement about this facet of the programme than any other. For eight presenters, "the children's reactions" [5] were the single most satisfying feature of BX: "It is thrilling to see the children's attitude change from 'boring' at the start of Lesson 1, to seeing it as the highlight of their week." [6] "I love the fact that the pupils really love the lessons and are so excited." [7]

Twenty two respondents commented that it was the Bible Explorer programme itself that gave them the greatest pleasure: "I love seeing the kids enjoy learning the stories, characters and timeline of events, through dressing up and the handsigns and keywords... I love the programme and its structure."[8] Another added that "I love the way it will always be unique to each presenter and I think the framework is superb".[9]

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[2] Survey #51
[3] Survey #26
[4] Survey #9
[5] Survey #1
[6] Survey #7
[7] Survey #9
[8] Survey #32
[9] Survey #9

> "I love the fact that it is such a dynamic programme which is accessible to every child, whether they struggle with usual lessons which require reading/writing etc. The handsigns are a brilliant way for the children to remember the story of the Bible. It is certainly my favourite time of the week. I enjoy the fact that the Bible comes to life and is no longer boring to them and that the children gain a better Bible understanding than many adults."[10]

Twelve respondents mentioned how much they enjoyed "sowing the seed of God's Word into the lives of boys and girls, hoping that one day the harvest will come"[11]. This is a similar figure to the number of presenters directly involved in outreach.

Question 3: What made you become a Bible Explorer presenter?

For Question 3, I used a rating question, but also included a textbox for additional comments. Respondents were asked to rate a list of items on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is Strongly Disagree and 5 is Strongly Agree. This same scale was used in four of the five rating questions in the survey. I decided to use this type of question rather than the matrix of choice format, which was also a possibility, because rating questions have the advantage of automatically tabulating an average score for each item listed. A rating average is a useful tool for drawing comparisons between items by ranking their scores. The number of respondents who skip a particular item is not taken into account when calculating these averages.

Respondents were generally agreed about the factors that made them become a presenter. The majority (42) strongly agreed that they enjoyed working with children, loved the Bible (41) and wanted to share the Bible with a new generation (41). The sense of a divine vocation was another powerful stimulus in taking up this role, with 45 presenters agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt called by God to this work. Four presenters emphasised this in their additional comments: "This was perfect for what God had placed on my heart – to teach Bible illiterate children in our 21st century world"[12] and again, "I was waiting for the Lord to show me what he wanted me to do next"[13]. I was interested that most presenters (36) had not received a direct invitation to join the BX team, nor were they actively looking for a local volunteering opportunity (33).

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[10] Survey #41
[11] Survey #2
[12] Survey #19
[13] Survey #43

The comments written in the textbox were particularly helpful for identifying additional relevant factors. Six presenters noted that they were encouraged to train for BX after seeing the adult version of the programme, "Walk through the Bible". Several commented that BX was a particularly useful resource for those already working in schools: "Bible Explorer was considered a great tool to add to our schools ministry. After attending a Walk Thru event, I could not wait to train to teach this exciting programme to children in schools."[14]

Question 4: Please share one of your favourite classroom moments

This was a hard question to categorize as the responses were so diverse. Some broad themes did emerge, however. Fifteen presenters commented on how much they enjoyed the children's questions and the opportunities that this gave for further discussion.

> "I particularly love hearing (the children) ask questions, which shows they are thinking about what they are learning, even if they are sometimes a bit 'left field'. For example, a Year 5 pupil asked the favourite question when dealing with creation in the first Bible Explorer OT lesson: 'Who made God?' This was followed by 'Why doesn't God always answer prayer?'"[15]

Although questions are an indication that the children are engaged with the programme, one presenter noted that they also bring "the challenge of replying authentically".[16] It is perhaps significant that the BXer's concern was for authenticity rather than accuracy. This points towards an aspect of the BX programme which was emphasised by a number of respondents across the survey: the programme is delivered by practising Christians, who live the faith they teach. One presenter clearly articulated this, when describing what they enjoyed most about teaching BX:

> "Meeting the children and interacting with them, answering (or attempting to answer) their questions, knowing that they are being taught about God and the Bible *by somebody who is a believer*."[17]

For many presenters, the best moments are those when a story comes alive in the telling. Thirteen BXers described just such an occasion, one of which featured the fall of Jericho:

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[14] Survey #18
[15] Survey #47
[16] Survey #30
[17] Survey #43 (My emphasis.)

> "We had acted it out, the shout had gone up and the walls (children) fell down. There was a lovely moment of silence, and a little voice said, "Can we do it again?" So we did!"[18]

Another respondent wrote, "I like the times when the class is so engrossed in the stories that I can just concentrate on the storytelling and involving the children - we all enjoy exploring the stories together."[19] This shared delight in the stories, with both children and presenters having fun, appears to be a defining characteristic of the Bible Explorer programme. Several New Testament presenters have also commented on the peculiar quality of the Passion narratives. "It's the crucifixion every time – you can hear a pin drop. The children are transfixed."[20]

> "I always like teaching NT lesson 3, the death and resurrection of Jesus. The class are always so still and quiet for this part of the lesson, and I can often feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in the class. After one such lesson, I had a child come up and ask, "Did Jesus really do all that for me?" It was wonderful to be able to tell them, 'yes'!"[21]

Presenters also relished those times "when teaching staff forget themselves and join in the action"[22]:

> "A teacher stopped me as we got to the crossing of the Red Sea. Miriam picks up her tambourine and leads the women in a dance. She said, "You can if you want." I was confused as to what she meant – but she opened the classroom door leading to the playground. So we danced out thru the playground with the whole class following and in thru another door... spontaneous, from the Head teacher! The other staff were asking at break what was going on?"[23]

Several BXers drew attention to those special moments when there is a real sense of unity in the classroom. Examples mentioned include "seeing the whole year group engage in a game of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" before telling the story of David and Goliath"[24] and an "impromptu communion"[25] in which a loaf of bread used to illustrate the Last Supper was shared between hungry children after the lesson.

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[18] Survey #13
[19] Survey #27
[20] Survey #53
[21] Survey #1
[22] Survey #18
[23] Survey # 3
[24] Survey #39
[25] Survey #36

Question 5: Which of the following do you use in your presentation?

This was the only one of the five rating questions to use a different rating scale. Respondents were asked whether they used the items listed "in every lesson", "in most lessons", "in some lessons", "very occasionally" or "never". For the purpose of rating the answers, the response "in every lesson" scored five, then each reply decreased in value, with "never" having a value of one. Thus, in Figure 2-1 below, the most frequently used items will have the highest scores. 98% of presenters reported that all or most of their lessons include story-telling. 75% use visual aids and props to tell stories in every session and 65% get the children to dress up and act out stories each week. A further 65% of presenters use scripted dramas for the children in all of their lessons and 35% tell some of their stories as a specific character. Although story-telling and drama are clearly the most popular way to present the material, other methods are widely used. 83% of BXers use PowerPoint in all or most of their classes, for example. Art, music, poems, video, photographs and magic tricks also feature and 35% of respondents will sometimes read from the Bible. The additional comments were interesting in highlighting a range of other items that are regularly used in presentations. These include Jewish artifacts (such as a prayer shawl, a large shofar and Phylacteries) and a model of the books of the Bible, displayed as a library.

Figure 2-1: Items most frequently used in BX presentations

Which of the following do you use in your presentations?

Item	Value
A Hebrew Bible	1.35
Pictures and art works	2.67
Games (e.g. Bingo)	1.67
Sharing food	1.56
Reading from the Bible	3.35
Magic tricks (e.g. Magic Bible)	2.17
Photographs	2.22
A felt board	1.22
Puppets	1.40
Poems and rhymes, including rap	2.45
Dancing and movement	1.73
Story-telling as a specific character	3.24
Story-telling through visual aids and props	4.63
Story-telling	4.85
Powerpoint presentation	4.28
Video	3.08
Dressing up, with some improvisation...	4.50
Drama, with scripts for the children	3.42
Songs and music	2.35

Question 6: Please describe anything you have found particularly difficult or challenging about teaching Bible Explorer.

Forty-five respondents answered this question, raising a variety of difficulties. The largest number (14) struggled to cover the course material in the time allocated:

> "The timing can be tricky – the one I really have trouble with is the first lesson of the Old Testament. That can really go over time sometimes and you have to say, "Do we finish on time?" If you have to finish, then Joseph gets left in the pit and we carry on next week!"[26]

Another commented,

> "There's nothing particularly difficult, but some of the concepts in the New Testament BX are hard for the children to grasp – especially in the time you have to teach them. For example, in Week 2, you have to cover Second Birth, Rejection, Power over Satan, Transfiguration."

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[26] Survey #53

Ten respondents noted that "the biggest problems have always come from teachers".[27] Teachers can be distracting, such as the "man who had a phone conversation while I was teaching and a T.A. who noisily started to put a display up, using a staple gun"[28]. BXers have also encountered staff who are clearly "bored with anything to do with the Bible"[29], have "negative reactions" [30] to the material or are "unprofessional and completely rude"[31].

> "Over the years, I have realised that the teacher's attitude is very important. I encourage 'new to me' teachers to listen and join in and let the class know that this is an interesting lesson! An indifferent teacher can mean an indifferent class."[32]

Discipline and "classroom control"[33] caused problems for seven respondents, especially for those without a background in teaching. Given the style of the programme, "keeping the balance between fun and enjoyment and it getting a bit out of hand"[34] can be a real challenge. Several presenters were also anxious about remembering "all the actions and storylines"[35].

Looking at broad trends, 60% of reported difficulties centred on the school where the programme is to be taught. Issues such as lack of space, changes to lesson times, inadequate equipment, and being left alone with a class seem to be common experiences for many BXers. The challenges of presenting the programme were responsible for 32.5% of reported problems, with presenters finding it difficult to write their own lesson plans, edit the stories, and teach some of the material – for example, "explaining the conception and virgin birth of the Lord Jesus"[36]. "The violence in a lot of Old Testament stories"[37] was also mentioned as a challenge by two respondents. In contrast, four respondents reported that they had experienced no difficulties or challenges in teaching Bible Explorer.

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[27] Survey #30
[28] Survey #43
[29] Survey #30
[30] Survey #17
[31] Survey #19
[32] Survey #27
[33] Survey #20
[34] Survey #24
[35] Survey #7
[36] Survey #41
[37] Survey #11

Question 7: How do you prepare for teaching Bible Explorer?

The respondents unanimously agreed that they check their props and presentation materials before a session and pray for the children and school where they will be teaching. 65% agreed or strongly agreed that they respond to any special interests a class or individual child might have. Just over 85% agreed that they go back to the Bible to re-read the stories that they will be presenting. This figure suggests a real concern for the accuracy of the material delivered in the classroom. All but one respondent reported that they tweaked each presentation in order to build on what worked well in previous sessions. More than half (56%) of the BXers feel a little anxious before presenting the programme, with 66% confirming that, for them, teaching is not simply a matter of loading up the car and being ready to go[38]. Interestingly, although 52% of the respondents use the BX website as a resource for new ideas, 79% reported that they did not use their Moses group in the same way. As almost 70% of respondents belong to a Moses group, the reason for this is unclear.

Question 8: What keeps you volunteering as a Bible Explorer presenter?

One of the surprises for me was the number of professional schools workers who use the Bible Explorer programme. As the wording of this question shows, I had initially assumed that all BXers were volunteers like myself.

> 'I am a full time Christian schools worker – BX is part of what I offer to schools. BX is the best Bible teaching tool for schools and I love it! BX is appreciated by teachers and children alike – why would I not take the fantastic opportunities afforded by teaching the storyline of the Bible to children?"[39]

BXers love teaching the programme and thoroughly enjoy their work: "I just love it and get withdrawal symptoms when I'm not doing it!"[40] The joy is not simply one-sided, however. The positive feedback from classes and the repeated requests for the programme from schools are important factors in continuing the work. It is this widespread enthusiasm for Bible Explorer that gives BXers the confidence to view the programme as "a very valuable resource"[41] for schools. Also apparent in 40 of the 46 responses is a deep sense of vocation.

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[38] I was amused that one presenter challenged this statement, noting that "you can do this on the bus!" Survey #24
[39] Survey #18
[40] Survey #17
[41] Survey #40

Words such as "passion" and "desire" are frequently used, and one BXer describes "God's call on my life. I am in my 80's, but God tells me to continue to teach and preach so I trust God for the strength and the joy"[42].

Question 9: Could you describe any personal benefits you have noticed as a result of presenting Bible Explorer?

I used a rating question to ask about the personal benefits of teaching Bible Explorer and, with hindsight, I might have done better to use an open question here: the comments indicate that some respondents were anxious about the tone of their reply. For example, the respondent who disagreed with the statement "I now value the Bible more than I did", commented that "this is not as negative as it sounds because ....I couldn't value the Bible more than I already did."[43] Another respondent wrote, "

> "For most of the ones where I have ticked 'Neither agree nor disagree' it is because these things have not really been affected by Bible Explorer, but it seems inappropriate to 'Disagree' with the statements as they are still true for me."[44]

This suggests that the other items with a low score may not be registering a straightforward disagreement with the statement, but rather reflecting a lack of change in an already high score. This is likely to be the case with the lowest scoring statement, "I read my Bible more regularly than I did before", which had six presenters disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with it. The trainee manual encourages all BXers to "read your Bible from front to back regularly." [45] It is also worth noting in this context the value of including a textbox for additional comments: the problems with this question only came to light because respondents had the opportunity to elaborate on their responses.

Even with these difficulties, the picture that emerges from this question is an extremely positive one. Presenters agreed or strongly agreed that presenting Bible Explorer had led to ten of the fourteen benefits listed, with individuals reporting a widespread increase in confidence across a range of areas. There was unanimous agreement that delivering the programme is both satisfying and enjoyable. I was intrigued by the high score for the

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[42] Survey #49
[43] Survey #51
[44] Survey #47
[45] The manual lists 15 "principles to live (or die) by". Number 5 states, "Read your Bible from front to back regularly. This is the best way to make sure you stick to the story." *BX OT Manual*, p. 36.

statement, "I love the details I now see in the Bible stories". I suspect this stems directly from the close reading required if one is to retell a story effectively. It certainly resonates with my own experience: it is the small details which make the stories come alive for an audience. Presenters also indicated that their own biblical knowledge had grown as a result of teaching the programme.

Question 10: From a school's point of view, what do you see as the particular strengths of the Bible Explorer programme?

Forty five presenters responded to this question, identifying a wide range of possible benefits for schools. Most were in the areas of teaching and learning, and focussed on the combination of expert knowledge and lively presentation which BXers see as the hallmarks of the programme:

> "BX offers quality teaching, community engagement and engaged children. BX delivers more than the national curriculum requirements – at no real cost to the school! Often less able or least engaged children participate in a way and at a level teachers have not seen before."[46]

Frequently noted was the fact that BXers are (unpaid) visitors to a school. This not only "helps the school to make the required links they now need to have with the local community"[47] but also "enables parts of the curriculum to be covered by people who believe and are therefore enthusiastic about the content."[48] This point was also raised in responses to Question 4. The commitment of the volunteers to teaching their faith is not only part of the rationale for the Bible Explorer ministry but is also essential for understanding the programme's success. As one respondent explains, "a trained person who is interested in the Bible personally will teach it with passion and from a personal point of view."[49] As BXers see it, the programme thus "releases teachers from having to teach something they might not believe in or feel equipped to teach. Also, it gets children excited about R.E., helping them to engage with the rest of the school's R.E. curriculum."[50] This 'spill over' effect, with children gaining enthusiasm for Religious Education as a whole, was noted by several respondents. Many BXers make the link between their own enjoyment of the material and the children's positive response to the programme. The lively teaching style allows presenters to bring

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[46] Survey #18
[47] Survey #1
[48] Survey #29
[49] Survey #35
[50] Survey #38

something of their own character and interests to the material, as well as catering for a wide range of abilities, including children with special educational needs. The result is something of "a fresh approach to R.E. in the classroom"[51]: not only do the children enjoy their sessions but the "teachers get to see R.E. is a fun subject"[52], too. It is apparent that schools value the programme not only as entertainment for their Year 5 and 6 children but also for its ability to deliver positive learning outcomes. "As one school said, BX is an exciting 'hands on' learning experience that not only informs pupils and extends their knowledge but also fires their imagination."[53] One respondent noted that she had "been Ofsteded twice and had 'excellent' as a result both times"[54]. This would be an interesting area to follow up as anecdotal evidence suggests that a considerable number of presenters have been part of an Ofsted inspection.

The answers to Question 10 call attention to several themes which have surfaced as significant either during an interview or on the school feedback forms. These include, for example, the importance of the worksheets that accompany the programme. One survey respondent suggested that BX is particularly good for Church schools[55]. This was confirmed by the feedback forms, which show that church schools do indeed enjoy the programme more than other schools. Interestingly, presenters can be a little vague about how the programme fits with their local curriculum requirements. The majority of survey respondents (25) believe that BX fulfils these. As Survey #23 shows, the situation can be more complex:

> "I live in Hampshire and this is the only county in the UK which forbids BX to be taught, so I have to travel to Dorset or Wiltshire to take lessons. I find this really frustrating."

In contrast, several of the interviewees raised concerns about the extent to which the BX programme actually delivered their local SACRE requirements. Only one respondent voiced a similar anxiety here, criticising the programme for being "heavy on the 'learning about' and light on the 'learning from' application side"[56]. This specific issue will be considered in more detail later.

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[51] Survey #52
[52] Survey #9
[53] Survey #42
[54] Survey #8
[55] Survey #20
[56] Survey #26.

Question 11: There is some material that all BXers must include in a presentation, but there are also parts of the programme where there is freedom to include other stories. How do you choose which extra material you will include in a session?

I used a rating question here as I planned to compare the various answers. There were fourteen categories in total, including a textbox for the respondent's own suggestions. BXers disagreed with only two of the given statements. The lowest score went to the suggestion that each handsign in the programme is given equal time, with 22 respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this. The second lowest score went to the suggestion that presenters frequently change their sessions. There was general agreement about the other statements, but two in particular were strongly supported, with 42 out of the total 45 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with them. The first of these was the suggestion that stories should be made as fun as possible. The second focussed on drawing out the connections between stories. No one disagreed with either of these statements. Given that there was also widespread agreement that children should be taught how each individual story fits into the broader narrative of the Bible, it is apparent that presenters are committed to communicating the over-arching unity of the Bible story.

> "I include the stories which ensure I cover the elements required by the local syllabus and, if time permits, those which the children will probably not have heard before, so that they get more of the big picture than they already have."[57]

Six respondents also went on to add their own observations, noting the importance of getting the children moving during a session, and the recurring problems of "time and information overload for the class".[58] Another described how "I prayed and asked God what I am to put in."[59]

Question 12: Which prophets do you like to include in your Old Testament presentation?

Week 5 of the Old Testament programme opens with a section about the prophets. The Bible Explorer training manual describes each of the keywords for the week's presentation and

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[57] Survey #1
[58] Survey #48
[59] Survey #44.

gives a brief outline of the essential material for that handsign. The section on the prophets reads as follows:

Prophets Speak: 'Shape Up or Ship Out'

When God's people drifted away from the Law, God often sent a special person called a prophet to speak to them. There are 17 prophetical books which begin at the time of the Divided Kingdom period. The message of the prophets can be summed up by saying "Shape Up or Ship Out" (either get right with God, or others will come and ship you away).[60]

Each presenter is free to choose how they will approach this material, within the boundaries of timing, age appropriateness and the charity's own policy restrictions[61]. In my own presentations, I discuss a range of different prophets; this prompted me to investigate the extent of the variation among other BXers. There were 44 responses to this question. I removed the references to those prophets who are allocated their own handsign elsewhere in the Old Testament programme, as these keywords are required teaching. This left a total of sixteen different prophets/prophetical books that are covered in Lesson 5. Daniel was the most widely taught, with 25 BXers including him in their presentation. Jonah was a close second (24) and Jeremiah came third, with a score of 22. The responses give a snapshot of the flexibility of the programme, with presenters drawing on their own personal interests to shape their sessions. Several respondents noted that they like to use a "visual aid Bible"[62] during Lesson 5. Others commented on the excellent DVD resources that are available for telling these stories, such as the "*Friends and Heroes*"[63] series. Figure 2-2 shows the number of respondents who taught each of the listed prophets/prophetical books.

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[60] *BX OT Manual*, 24.

[61] Presenters are required not to deviate from the expressed content for the lessons. In addition, they are not to promote their own ministry or include doctrinal issues. Bxers are to "use the utmost discretion and be as interdenominational as possible. Never critise any denominations or other religions..." *BX OT Manual,* 49.

[62] Survey #52

[63] Available at www.friendsandheroes.com/uk

Figure 2-2: Most commonly taught prophets

Q12: Most commonly taught prophets (44 respondents)
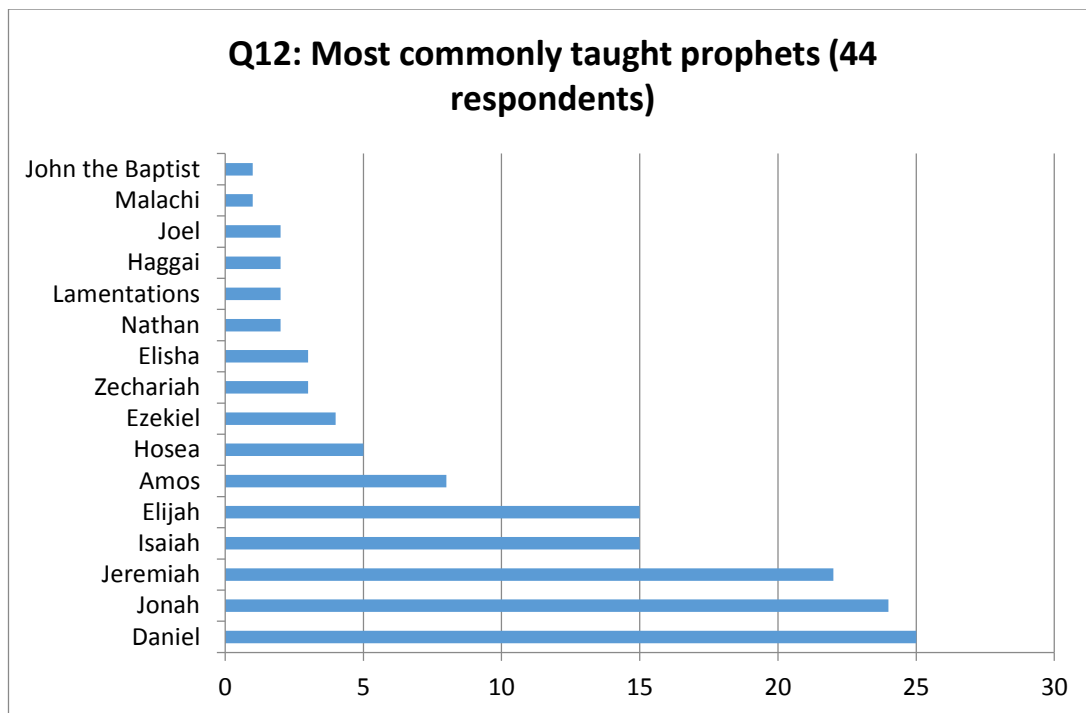
Question 13: Do you present both the Old and New Testament programmes?

It is the policy of Walk through the Bible Ministries that, "following the Old Testament Bible Explorer training, at least 10 full Bible Explorers should be taught before any training in the New Testament can be considered."[64] This means that there will always be some presenters who are not yet eligible to teach the New Testament programme. 70% of the survey respondents teach both programmes, suggesting a significant degree of classroom experience within the data set. Figure 2-3 shows the relative proportions of those teaching both programmes and those teaching only the Old Testament.

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[64] *BX OT Manual*, 50.
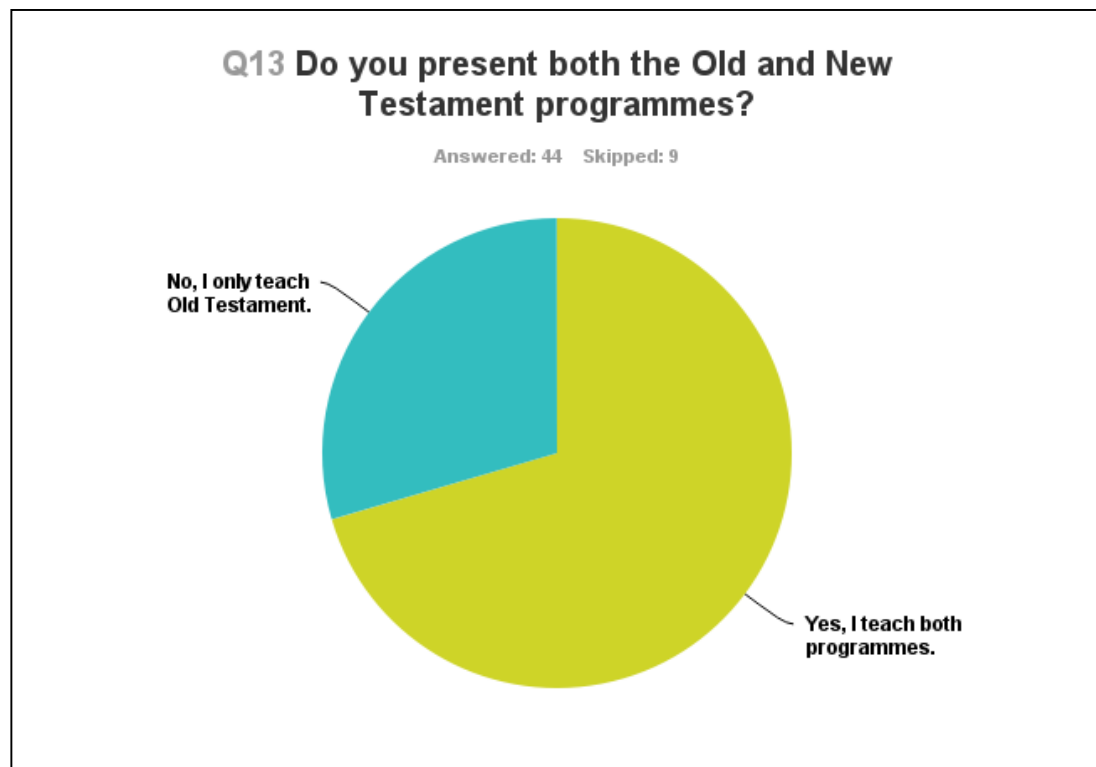
Question 14: What differences would you say there are between the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) presentations?

All of the 32 respondents who teach both programmes answered this question. Only one BXer felt that there was "not a lot of difference really"[65] in the two presentations. Others saw clear differences in the content of the two programmes: "the Old Testament is like a fast moving movie, the New Testament is more a biography of the 2 main characters, Jesus and Paul."[66] There is also "more dressing up and actions in OT; more teaching rather than storytelling in NT"[67]. These differences in style and content mean that, for most BXers, the Old Testament is "easier to present"[68] because it has a "clearer storyline"[69] and "gives more scope for acting out stories"[70].

> The OT has so many great stories to choose from and vary the presentation. NT tends to include well known stories but with details and facts that are largely unknown by the children.

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[65] Survey #19
[66] Survey #25
[67] Survey #11
[68] Survey #51
[69] Survey #27
[70] Survey #41

> OT is definitely a real storytelling feast. NT is usually a bit more interactive discussion – which is great, too![71]

Eight presenters noted that the New Testament is not only harder to teach, but also correspondingly harder for the pupils to grasp. Part of the problem stems from the fact that "the New Testament is something that the children think they know fairly well, but when you start drilling down into the stories, they often have the wrong end of the stick completely."[72] Also, the "NT is more philosophical and it needs more skill to make it accessible to the children"[73]. Despite these challenges, 25% of respondents said there was something special about teaching the New Testament: "the Old Testament is easier to teach... but the NT gives you the opportunity to really explain the gospel to the children!"[74]

> Jesus says, 'if I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me' and very much the exciting part about the New Testament is you're lifting up Jesus. You can't preach but you're teaching and saying what He did and so there's an excitement in that and how people, children, respond to that. In the Old Testament, God is alive, but Jesus brings it bang up-to-date. I enjoy teaching both, but perhaps the New Testament a little bit better.[75]

Two respondents commented that, in their area, "schools often want the Old Testament taught more than the New, as it's less familiar material for them."[76] The data contained in the school feedback forms confirms that this trend is widespread.

Question 15: In what way, if any, do the children react differently to the Old Testament and New Testament presentations?

Again, all of the 32 respondents who teach both programmes answered this question. Eleven felt that there was no difference in the children's reactions to the two presentations: "they seem to approach both with the same enthusiasm and excitement, in my experience."[77] On the other hand, 20 presenters did report differences in the children's response. Children take longer "to settle into"[78] the New Testament; the New Testament handsigns are more difficult

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[71] Survey #18
[72] Survey #25
[73] Survey #51
[74] Survey # 1
[75] Survey #53
[76] Survey #1
[77] Survey #25
[78] Survey #33

to learn[79]; and the older Year 6 pupils can be reluctant to get involved[80]. As was noted in responses to Question 14, "the kids tend to be much more familiar with the stories of Jesus than the stories from the Old Testament"[81]. Six BXers again raised this point and, for some, this familiarity posed a challenge: "I sometimes think the children approach NT with a 'we heard it all before' attitude..."[82] The problem can be more acute in a faith-based institution: "In church schools, the NT is often more familiar, so perhaps a bit harder to keep their attention.[83]" In contrast, "much of the OT seems to be new to children in any type of school."[84] The impact and "novelty value"[85] of the Old Testament was mentioned by four respondents. As highlighted earlier in responses to Question 4, Week 3 of the New Testament programme (crucifixion and resurrection) is "always very powerful"[86]. Four respondents stressed the continuity between the two programmes, which enables the children to "grow in their understanding of the 'Big Picture'"[87] and to appreciate that the "two parts make the whole"[88].

Question 16: When presenting the New Testament to a class, what differences have you noticed, if any, between classes that have previously studied the Old Testament and classes that have not?

Six of the 32 respondents reported that "I have never presented NT to a class that has not done OT already"[89] and one reported the opposite – "I've not presented NT to any classes that have done OT first!"[90]. Of the remaining 24 replies, 20 presenters felt that studying the Old Testament first made a significant difference to the children's response. Seven raised practical considerations – children had a better understanding of the historical context and geography of the New Testament stories if they had previously studied the Old Testament, and Year 6 pupils were less self-conscious about joining in with the handsigns if the format of the lesson was familiar to them. Several presenters noted how excited the children were

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[79] Surveys #47, #43, #35.
[80] Survey #22
[81] Survey #6
[82] Survey #17
[83] Survey #27
[84] Survey #27
[85] Survey #47
[86] Survey #15.
[87] Survey #39
[88] Survey #3
[89] Survey #30
[90] Survey #26

to continue with the story: "they have enjoyed OT so much they can't wait for the New."[91] Eighteen BXers, however, focused on the children's understanding of the stories: "those who have had the New Testament first struggle more with the BIG picture of God's story"[92]. "It's probably a little confusing..."[93] In contrast,

> 'Teaching the Old Testament first helps them see so many more connections with the New. If I do it the other way round, which is not very often, I find I am constantly having to explain the New in the light of the Old. Things like the Passover and sacrifice have little meaning, as does the Jews' devotion to their land.'[94]

Enabling pupils to make connections between the two Testaments leads to "lots of children having 'lightbulb moments'"[95] and can produce a real depth of meaning for the children:

> '...a New Testament only class feels more superficial. Those who have done Old Testament have the correct perspective on the Bible and, I think, tend to take the New Testament more seriously.'[96]

Three presenters made the practical point that it is sometimes not possible to teach the Testaments in their correct order. In small schools, Year 5 and 6 pupils are often taught together in one class, and the Old and New Testaments are presented in alternate years: "half of the children will learn the Testaments in the wrong order. This is not ideal, but it is unavoidable."[97]

Question 17: Is there anything you would like to add about your experience of presenting Bible Explorer?

Twenty-eight individuals added their comments here. Various issues were raised, the vast majority of which were positive. Most wanted to emphasise how much they enjoy presenting the programme: as one BXer wrote, it is "just such fun to teach a course of such genius"[98].

> 'I really enjoy doing it. I have been a presenter since 1999. I wondered at first if I would get bored after a time, but the children are different each time and I am teaching an amazing

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[91] Survey #11
[92] Survey #39
[93] Survey #53
[94] Survey #6
[95] Survey #25
[96] Survey #51
[97] Survey #43
[98] Survey #14

story! As I understand new things about the Lord and about parts of the story, I am able to alter the sessions slightly.'[99]

There was much affection expressed for the course itself, with 8 presenters describing it in glowing terms: "It is the best thing since sliced bread!"[100] and "the best course I have come across in 58 years of being a Christian!!!"[101].

> 'I love it. It is the best program I know for getting into the heart of the Bible and allowing time to give to teaching that the Bible is fun and relevant! I don't know of any other program in schools that gets you in for 10 one-hour lessons and for the children to go away with this for life – recalling the BIG picture of what God is doing in this world.'[102]

There was also a strong awareness that it is a privilege to go into schools to present the course, but this carries with it a corresponding burden of responsibility. "I am aware that some of the children may have very little contact with the Bible or Christians and so it is important that I do the best I can!"[103]

> 'I have enjoyed the privilege of doing this work... I think the Presenter's demeanour as a Christian may have as much effect for the Kingdom as the material and certainly goes a long way in making it stick.'[104]

Some respondents spoke about the urgency of this ministry and clearly longed to see "many more BXers"[105] working in schools. The programme was recognised as a "precious resource and tool"[106] and "a very good way of meeting a lot of children who will never go to church!"[107]

> 'I would love to see more people getting the vision of how great the BX programme is and seizing the opportunities to get into schools at the moment, using BX. It seems that schools are currently very open to Christians going in and doing lessons – but for how long?? I would love, perhaps in the future, to be involved in mobilizing Christians to train to get into schools. We have got to have faith that it's God's will for us to be doing this – his will to teach the next generation.'[108]

This sense of vocation was echoed by a further five respondents.

> 'Most schools make a big thank you card at the end and many of the comments bring tears to the eyes, e.g. "What you have taught me I will never forget", "the best RE lessons in the world". I look forward to hearing when I get to heaven how BX impacted some of the kids I

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[99] Survey #43
[100] Survey #17
[101] Survey #52
[102] Survey #5
[103] Survey #43
[104] Survey #51
[105] Survey #3
[106] Survey #3
[107] Survey #27
[108] Survey #19

have taught and I pray that, for some, it may have been a part of them coming to faith. It couldn't get much better than that!!!'[109]

Others noted assorted personal benefits from teaching the programme. These include the "joy of meeting like-minded people"[110], learning "the overview of the Bible for myself"[111] and developing positive contacts with schools and staff members[112].

Anxieties were also voiced. Specific concerns were raised about changes to the local SACRE curriculum[113] and the extent to which access to a school can depend on the goodwill of individual staff members[114]:

'The class teachers can be really enthusiastic, then change classes or leave the school; or an enthusiastic Head Teacher leaves and suddenly I find the new staff don't want me in the school any more – especially those with atheistic leanings.'[115]

One respondent, a qualified primary school teacher, expressed her discontent with the New Testament programme: "I wish they had put in lots more stories of Jesus, miracles and parables. The last lesson is dismal."[116] However, she also noted that she had "seen children grow spiritually" and had had "great discussions" with staff members about their faith.

Question 18: Do you belong to a Moses Group?

A Moses group is a regional cluster of BX presenters. All BXers are encouraged to belong to their local Moses Group as a source of mutual support. Forum posts on the BX website suggest that presenters thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to exchange ideas, swap classroom stories and offer encouragement to one another. Of the 45 presenters who answered this question, 31 belong to a Moses group.

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[109] Survey #17
[110] Survey #11
[111] Survey #35
[112] Surveys #20 and #5
[113] Survey #26
[114] Survey #21
[115] Survey #23
[116] Survey #11

Question 19: If so, how often do you meet?
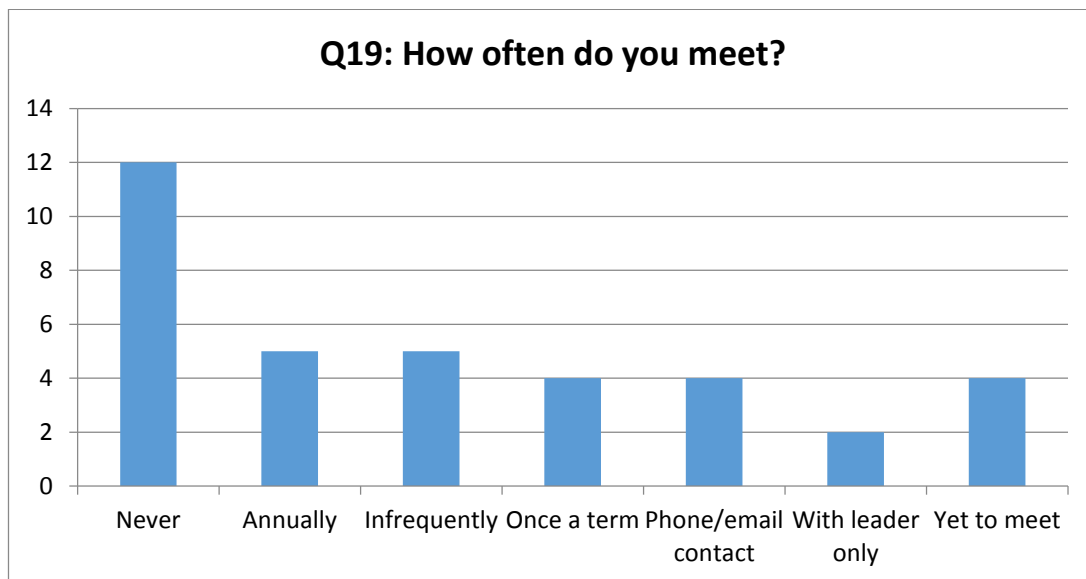
Although nearly 70% of respondents reported that they belonged to a Moses group, the data shows that these groups come together only three times a year or less. Indeed, twelve presenters have never met with their local Moses group at all. Figure 2-4 shows how frequently meetings take place. Respondents volunteered a variety of reasons for not making contact. Some "are spread over a large geographical area"[117], others are in a group with presenters who are not currently teaching[118], and some choose to keep in touch with each other via phone and email[119]. In question 7, respondents were asked whether they used ideas and suggestions from their Moses group in their presentations. Given the high number of Moses group members in the sample, I was surprised that nearly 80% replied in the negative. This result is likely to be explained by the fact that, in practice, the groups meet only rarely.

Question 20: Do you have the support of a prayer group?

Each BXer is encouraged to seek the support of a prayer group for their work. Of the 44 respondents who replied to this question, nearly 80% (35) answered positively. Given that 98% of presenters agreed or strongly agreed that they pray "for the children, the school and

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[117] Survey #1
[118] Surveys #43 and #27
[119] Surveys #25, #13 and #11

for my time in the classroom"[120] before they teach a session, the Bible Explorer programme appears to be immersed in prayer.

Question 21: Please describe any previous teaching experience you may have had before becoming a Bible Explorer presenter.

Of the 45 presenters who answered this question, only eight reported that they had no previous teaching experience. The majority had taught in a variety of settings, including primary and secondary schools and adult education; others held teaching roles within their church. There was an interesting spread of specialist subjects amongst the teachers - these included Economics and Business Studies, Music, Biology, English, Nursing and, of course, RE. I was intrigued that two BXers described their previous experience in schools as "taking assemblies"[121]. Each was a volunteer with either OAC Ministries[122] or Open the Book[123]. Another BXer reported that she volunteered as a TLG Early Intervention Coach and Co-ordinator. Areas of overlapping ministry are potentially a useful forum for raising awareness of Bible Explorer. Figure 2-5 shows the range of teaching experience described by the survey respondents.

Figure 2-5 shows the teaching experience of the respondents

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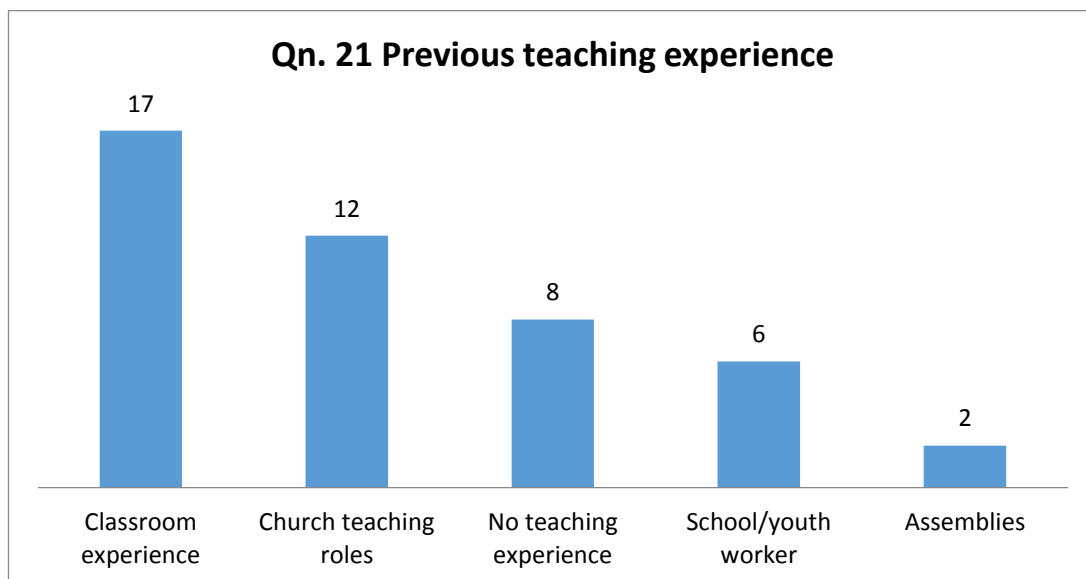
[120] Question 7 of the survey, statement #1. No respondent disagreed with this statement.
[121] Survey #36
[122] Survey #48
[123] Survey #24

Question 22: Please describe any roles you hold within your church community.

With one exception, all the respondents were actively involved with their church community. This is unsurprising as all presenters are required under their terms of engagement to be "an active member of a local church"[124]. Nevertheless, there is a strong note of confidence and commitment in the respondents' descriptions of their church work. BXers carry out a variety of different roles, with nearly 60% working with children in their church community and a further 14% also working with children in local schools. A quarter of respondents are involved with outreach. Some run events for their local community, such as "a recent visit of the African Children's Choir"[125] or a "men's outreach breakfast"[126]; others are recognised as evangelists, either working "in a missionary organisation"[127] or for their church in this specific role. A fairly typical entry reads as follows:

> 'Vicar's wife! Run a weekly after school club – overtly Christian, but with mainly non-Christian kids. Run house group in church. Lead Sunday group for 11-14 year olds. In charge of running and organising annual church Easter Holiday Club for 60 local kids.'

Sixteen respondents hold positions of leadership within their church, either as a Church minister or as a member of the leadership team. A further five BXers run housegroups, with an additional seven leading (or helping to lead) their community's worship. As a puppeteer myself, I was delighted to see that two BXers regularly work with puppets: one leads workshops[128] and the other is part of a puppet team[129].The data indicates that BXers share a widespread interest in both evangelism and children, emphasising the foundations of this particular ministry.

Question 23: How many BX presentations (counting Lessons 1-5 as one presentation) have you completed in the last school year?

I estimated that the maximum number of presentations one individual could teach in a school year was 60. This was on the basis that a full presentation takes half a term to deliver, and that ten classes could be taught per week. Two respondents had completed more than 50 presentations in the previous academic year. All presenters are expected to teach at least

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[124] *BX OT Manual*, 51.
[125] Survey #23
[126] Survey #52
[127] Survey #35
[128] Survey #7
[129] Survey #2

6 sessions per year[130]; the average number for the survey respondents was considerably higher at just under nine. Between them, the respondents had delivered a total of 401 presentations during the year. If a BXer has not presented a Bible Explorer lesson for twelve months, "no further Bible Explorer lessons may be taught until they have undergone retraining."[131] One respondent specifically commented on this requirement: "I have had difficulties revisiting old schools and also getting into new ones... It is now 2 years since I last taught and I am now 73 years old and cannot face retraining.[132]" Figure 2-6 shows the number of presentations taught by each Bxer in the survey.

Figure 2-6 shows the classes taught in the previous year

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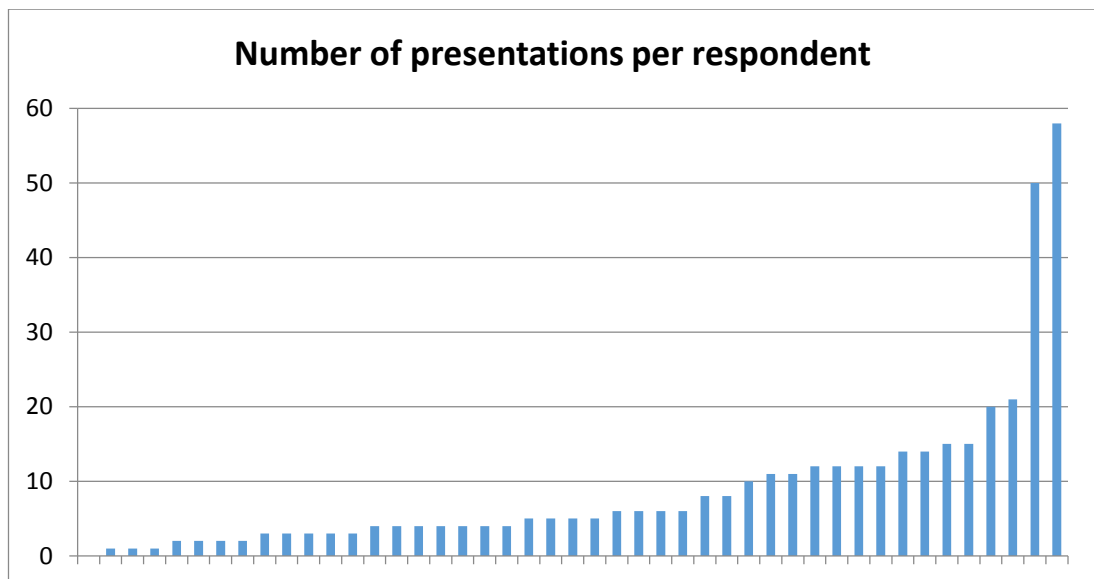
[130] *BX OT Manual*, 51.

[131] *BX OT Manual*, 51

[132] Survey #41

Question 24: How many schools do you return to on a regular basis?

Number of regular repeat bookings
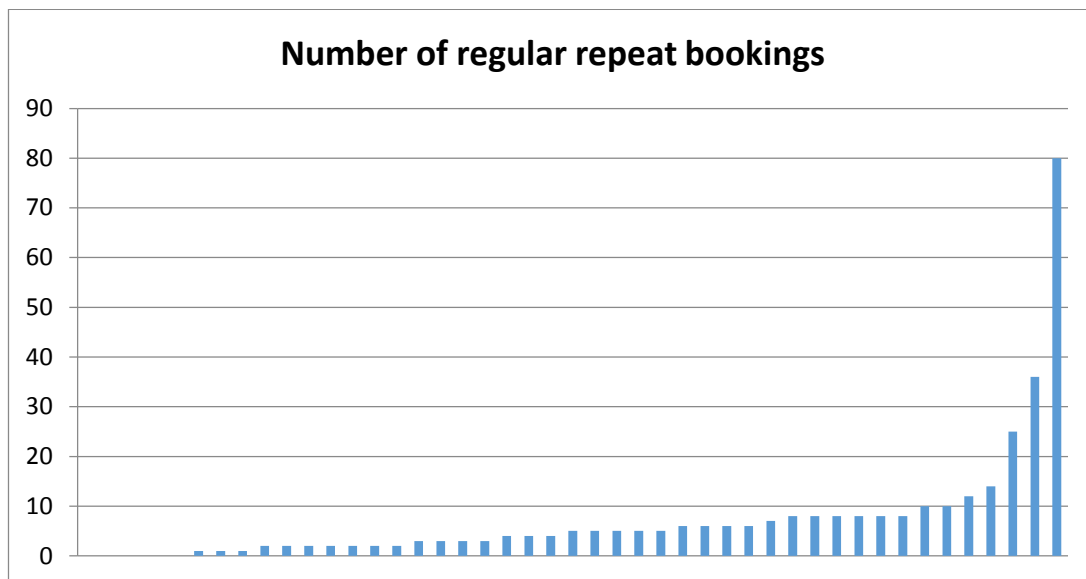
Figure 2-7 shows how many repeat bookings each survey respondent has. The respondent who returns to 80 schools on a regular basis explained that some schools are visited every two years, as part of a rolling programme[133]. Presenters volunteered a variety of reasons for what they obviously saw as a failure to secure repeat bookings. These included "curriculum changes"[134] within their local area and the loss of staff who had previously supported the programme[135]. Moving home also caused problems, with BXers moving into areas already covered by other presenters[136] or into new parishes[137]. This highlights a particular difficulty within the Church of England, where ministries recognised in one Diocese may not be recognised in another. One respondent commented that, although they returned to two schools regularly to teach BX, they returned to 25 schools to lead Easter and Christmas plays[138]. This is a reminder that it is not necessarily hostility to Christianity that keeps BX out of schools, but the more practical problem of finding room in a busy school timetable for the programme.

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[133] Survey #8
[134] Survey #41
[135] Survey #41
[136] Survey #8
[137] Survey #36
[138] Survey #26

With hindsight, this question failed to take account of those BXers who operate as part of a team, sharing repeat bookings between them. This is my experience in Merton, where schools are allocated between team members, in order to share the workload and to support individual presenters.

Question 25: How long have you taught Bible Explorer?

Figure 2-8: Length of time as a BX volunteer
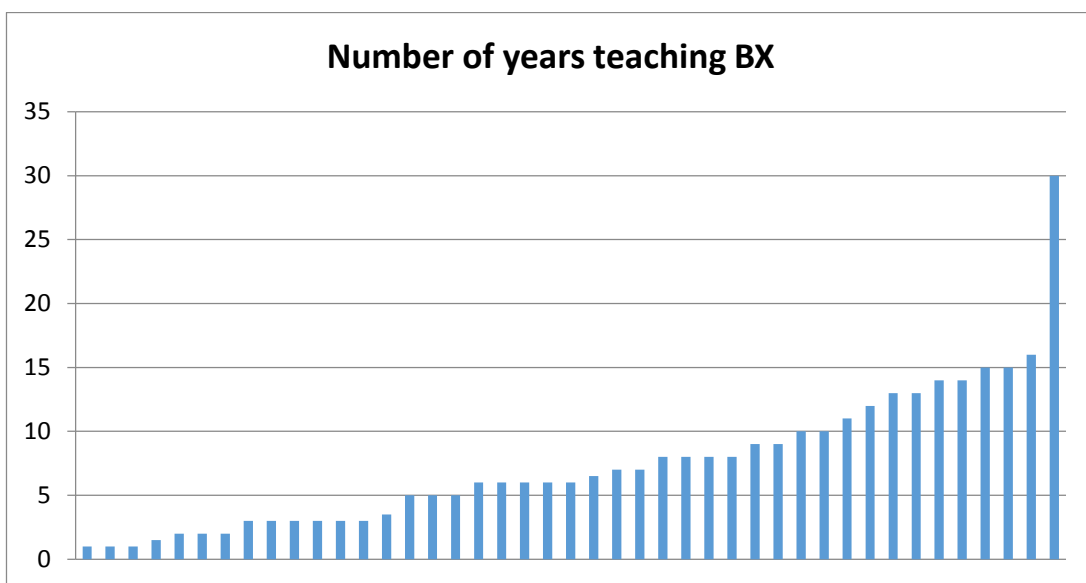
Figure 2-8 illustrates how long each BXer has been in post. I was delighted that one respondent was "on the first training team" [139] and so has taught Bible Explorer since the programme started 30 years ago. The data shows a good spread of experience, suggesting that a fairly steady number of presenters come forward for training and then stay with the programme for a number of years. Given that the majority of BXers are over 46 years of age, it may be that, after 15 years of service, presenters are ready to retire from a demanding, if enjoyable, ministry.

Question 26: Which church denomination do you belong to?

Although the BX programme is careful to avoid doctrinal issues, Walk through the Bible Ministries as an organisation subscribes to the Evangelical Alliance's Statement of Faith.

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[139] Survey #33

Most BXers would describe themselves as evangelical Christians. There are no Roman Catholics in the sample. Figure 2-9 shows the church denominations represented among the survey respondents.

Figure 2-9 shows the Church denominations represented in the survey

Church denominations
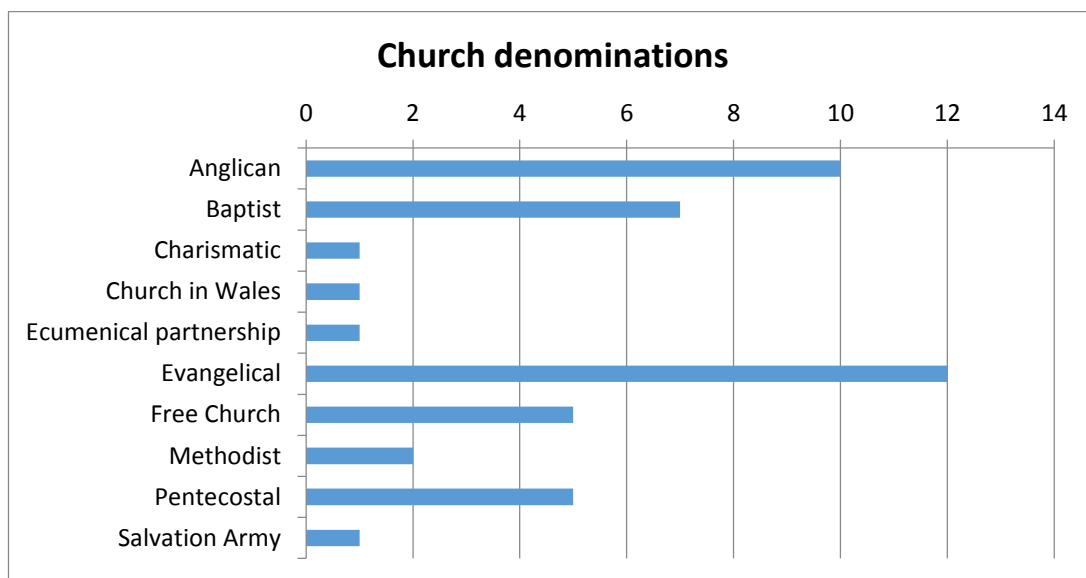
Question 27: If happy to do so, please give your age.

My incorrect assumption that all BX presenters were volunteers led me to think that the majority would be of retirement age. This was an overestimate; in fact, only 43% of BXers are over the age of 56. The largest single category with a total of 14 individuals (8 women and 6 men) are those in the 46-55 age bracket. I was interested to compare these figures with the age patterns for teachers in England[140]. Teachers in primary schools aged under 30 make up 26.4% of all primary school teachers. Unfortunately, the BX statistics are not an exact match, with my age categories running from 18-25 and 26-35. Even so, only 11% of BXers are under the age of 35. A more dramatic difference is in the older age range: teachers aged 50 and over make up only 18.6% of all primary school teachers. The exact figure for BXers is somewhere between 43 and 75 per cent - the higher figure includes all BXers over the age of 45. Several school feedback forms noted how much the children have enjoyed

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[140] Figures are taken from the Department for Education's statistics on the size and characteristics of the schools' workforce in state-funded schools. Available online at https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2013

working with an older person. Figure 2-10 groups the survey respondents according to their age.

Respondents by age groups
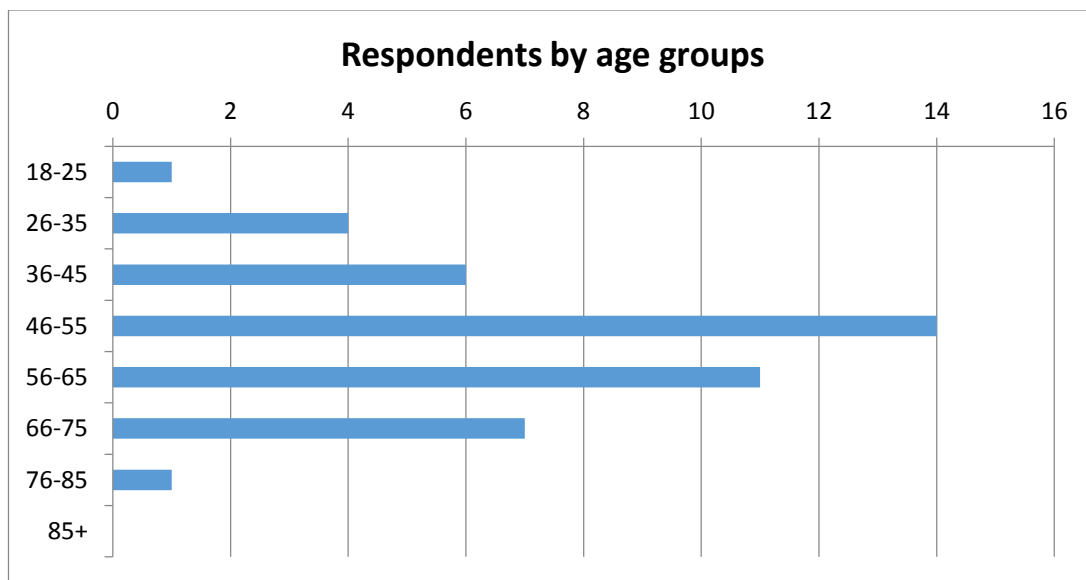
Question 28: If happy to do so, please give your gender.

According to government statistics, three out of four teachers are female[141]. The pattern for BXers is similar, with only one third of presenters being male. Figure 2-11 shows this gender split.

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[141] Department for Education, *School Workforce in England: November 2013* (Issued 10 April 2014), 7.

Figure 2-11 shows the gender of the survey respondents

Respondents by gender

15

30

Female
Male
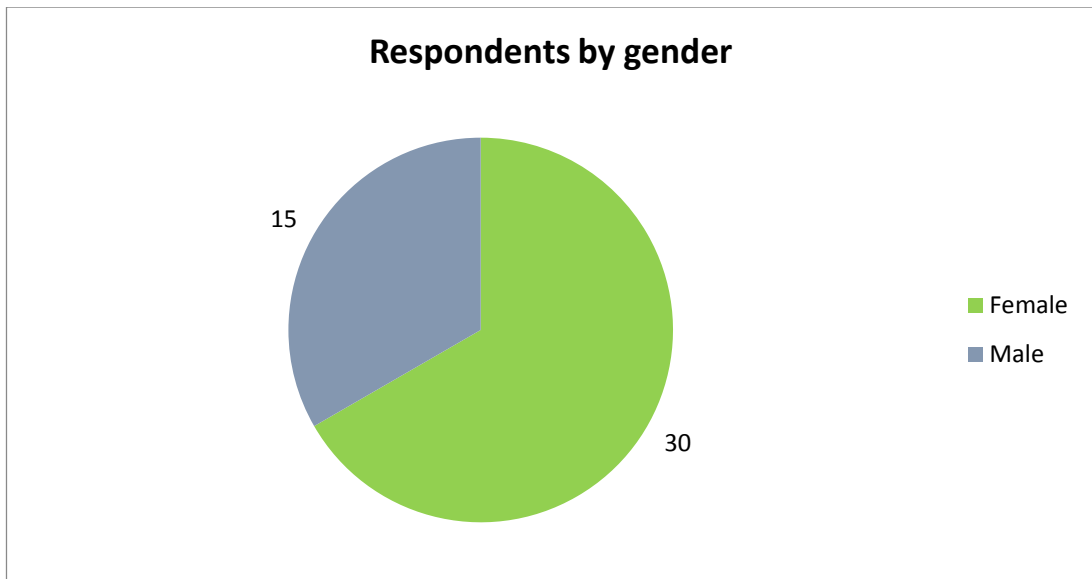
Chapter 3

Introduction

The *Bible Explorer Manual* explains that "Bible Explorer will send a letter of thanks and a request for a voluntary donation/gift to support the [work of the charity] on completion of each BX."[1] A feedback form is also sent to each school at this stage, asking staff what their personal reaction to the course was and how they would describe the reaction of their pupils. The form records the name of the presenter; the name, address and postcode of the school; the approximate number of children taught; the date of the final session; and which Testament was presented. Schools are also asked whether they would recommend the programme to other schools in their area. The forms are returned to the BX office rather than to the individual presenter. Obviously, not every school will return their form. To give a personal example, in the calendar years 2012 and 2013, I taught in eight different schools, returning twice to four of them. Of these schools, only four gave feedback. Once processed by the BX office, the report forms are forwarded to the individual presenter. In January 2014, I visited the Bible Explorer Office in Beaumont, Essex. I was given access to all the school feedback forms from the calendar years 2012 and 2013. This was an extraordinarily rich data source and I am most grateful to the BX team for their warm welcome and support. Having removed those forms that were illegible, I was left with a data set of 692 forms. These give valuable information about schools, BX presenters and pupils, and combine both quantitative and qualitative data.

The Schools and their Context

There were feedback forms from 470 different schools, located in England, Wales, the Channel Isles, Northern Ireland and Eire. Figure 3-1 shows how many schools there were in each of these regions. There were no feedback forms from Scotland[2].

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[1] Walk through the Bible Ministries, *Bible Explorer Old Testament Regional Trainee Manual* (rev. ed.; Beaumont, Essex: WTB Ministries, 2009), 62.

[2] There are, in fact, seven Scottish BXers, teaching, on average, one course per year, in the Dumfries area.

Figure 3-1: Location of schools represented in the feedback forms

470 UK & Ireland schools

28   0

27

9

111

295

England
Wales
Ch.Isles
N.Ireland
Eire
Scotland
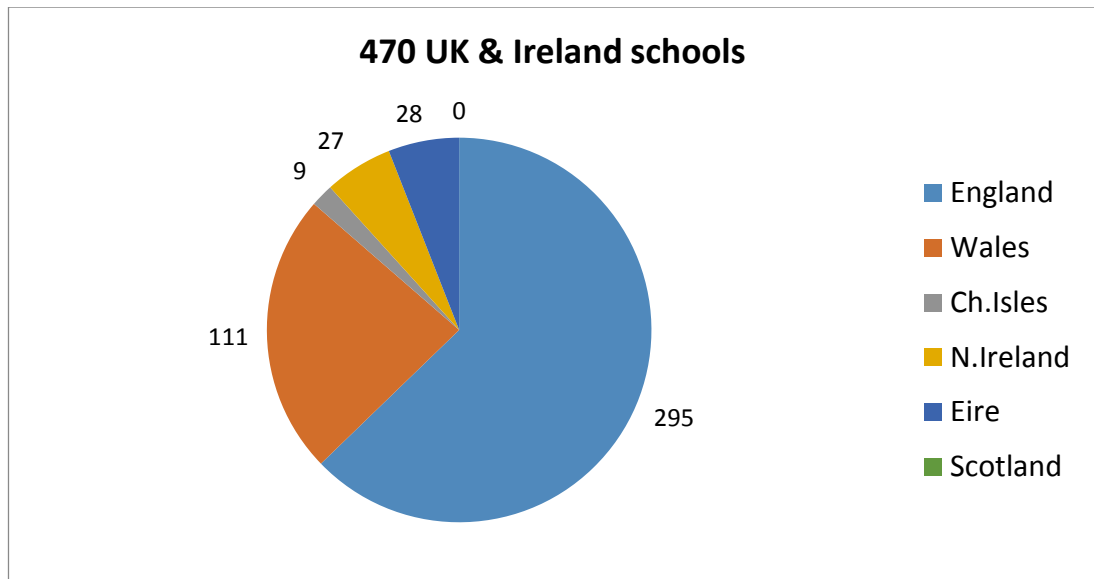
The majority of the English schools were located in three regional clusters, based in the North West, the South East and the East of England. Figure 3-2 shows how many BX schools there were in each area. The regional divisions are based on the European Parliament electoral wards.

Figure 3-2: English schools according to region

295 English schools by region

4   8

(North West)
97

75
(South East)

6

12

16

25

52
(East of England)

London
South East
South West
East of England
East Midlands
West Midlands
Yorkshire & Humber
North West
North East
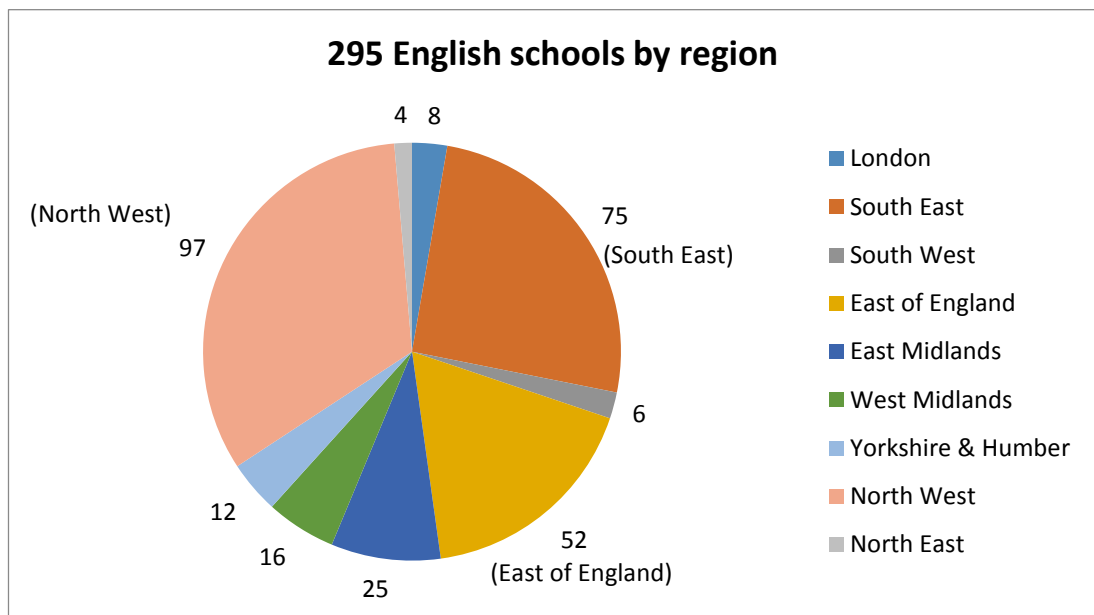
The reason for these clusters becomes clear when the presenters are analysed according to the locality in which they work: the number of schools hosting Bible Explorer is related to the

number of active presenters in that region. However, some BXers are extremely prolific and have a much greater impact on the number of schools which experience Bible Explorer than their colleagues. For example, one would expect that the region with the largest number of participating schools, the North West, would also have the largest number of presenters, but this is not the case. The 21 presenters in the North West are extremely active, each servicing on average 4.6 schools. Note, too, the impact of the two hard-working BXers in the West Midlands, who cover 16 different schools between them. If we take out these two regions, the average per presenter for the rest of England is just 2.5 schools. Figure 3-3 shows the area in which each of the 97 English presenters was working. If a BXer was operating in more than one region, I allocated them to the area where the majority of their schools was based.

Figure 3-3 shows where BX presenters are working in England
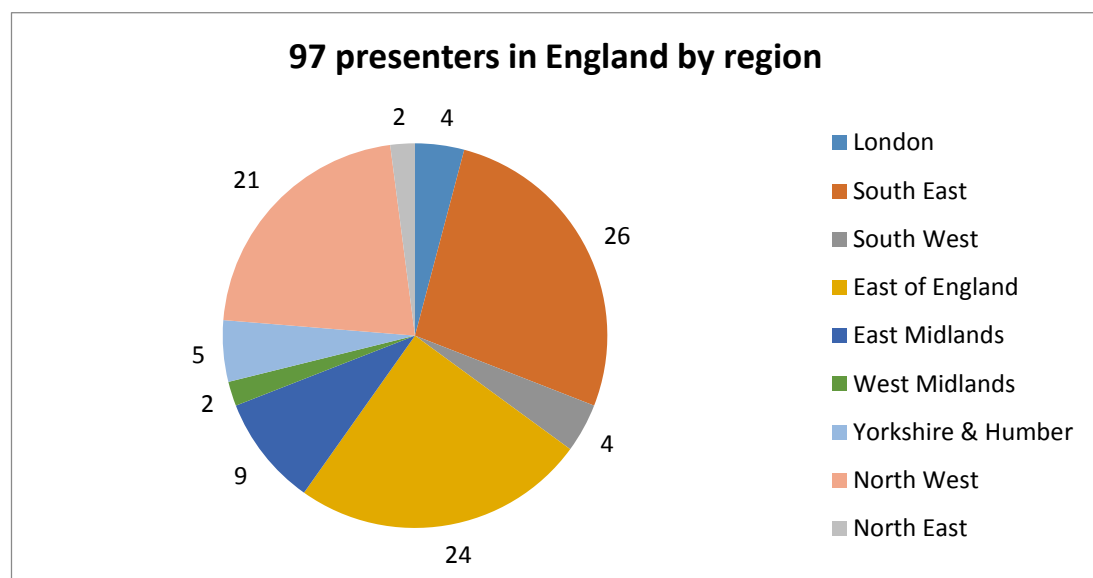
I was interested to see the type of area where Bible Explorer presenters have the greatest access to local schools. Most feedback forms gave the postcode for the school or, at the very least, a partial address, from which the postcode could be found. Once I had postcodes for all the schools, it was possible to classify each of their locations according to the 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Small Area Geographies. This is the classification system used in the 2011 Census and is available to download through the Ordnance Survey OpenData database. Figure 3-4 shows the range of locations in which the 406 English and Welsh schools were situated.

Figure 3-4 shows the type of area where BX is taught

England & Wales schools urban (A-C) or rural (D-F)

Legend:
- A1: major conurbation
- B1: minor conurbation
- C1: town
- C2: town (sparse region)
- D1: rural town/fringe
- D2: rural town (sparse)
- E1: village
- E2: village (sparse)
- F1: isolated
- F2: isolated (sparse)
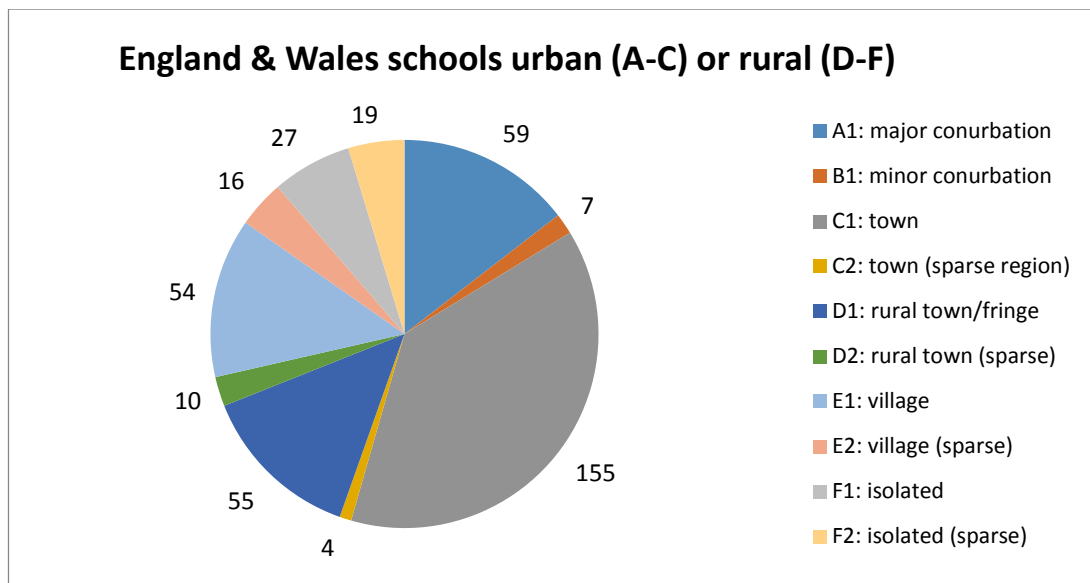
The Rural-Urban 2011 Census Analysis gives interesting background on the population usually resident in England and Wales. In 2011, 81.5% of the English and Welsh populations lived in urban areas, with 18.8 million people living in major cities, such as London, Birmingham and Manchester. Only 18.5% of people lived in rural areas; these residents had an older profile than those living in urban areas. They were also more likely than those in urban areas to be white; Christian; of 'good' or 'very good' health; and to be owner occupiers[3]. Figure 3-5 highlights this urban-rural split, showing how many people, according to the 2011 Census, live in each type of location. Please note that categories A, B and C are classified as urban districts, while D, E and F are rural districts.

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[3] www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/rural-urban-analysis/index.html. Accessed at 18.28 on 29.07.2014.

Figure 3-5 shows the distribution of homes across England and Wales
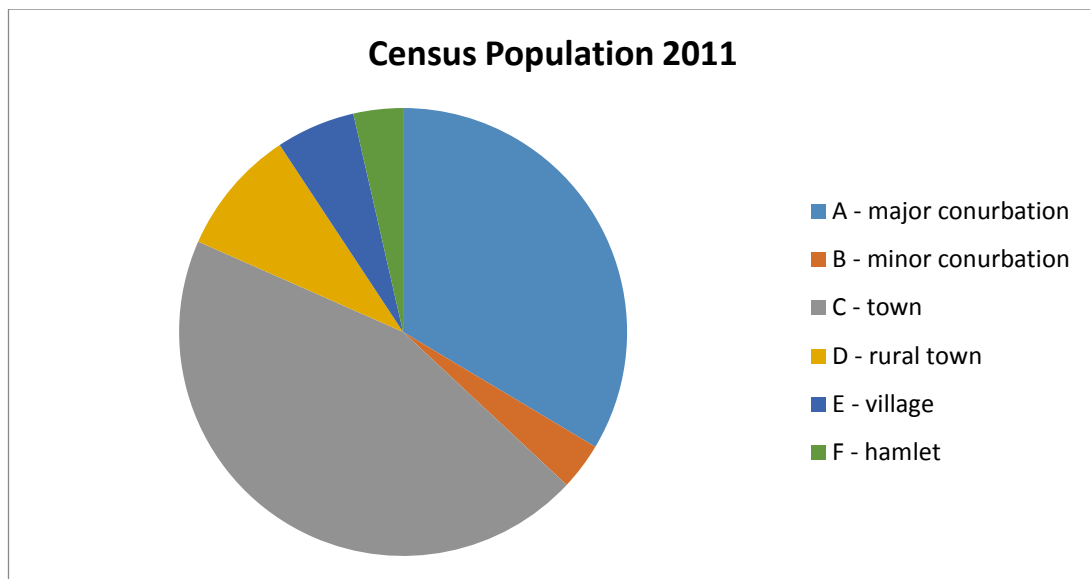
In contrast, the urban-rural split for schools which host Bible Explorer is more heavily weighted towards the rural: only 55% of schools which use BX are in an urban location, and 45% are in a rural location. In Figure 3-6, showing the type of area where BX schools are situated, the rural categories D, E and F are expanded in comparison with the same categories for Figure 3-5. There are also far fewer BX schools in major conurbations than one would expect, given the number of families living in cities. The reason for this is not clear. There may be a greater demand for the programme in rural areas, where schools are smaller and there are less specialist staff available to teach RE. Alternatively, it may be a matter of supply, with more potential BX presenters living in rural areas. The census data tends to support this latter view, in that rural populations are more likely to be Christian, older, in good health and financially secure – a profile that fits, at least partially, with the personal data given in the survey.

Figure 3-6 shows the distribution of BX across England and Wales

Urban and Rural BX schools

- A - major conurbation
- B - minor conurbation
- C - town
- D - rural town
- E - village
- F - hamlet
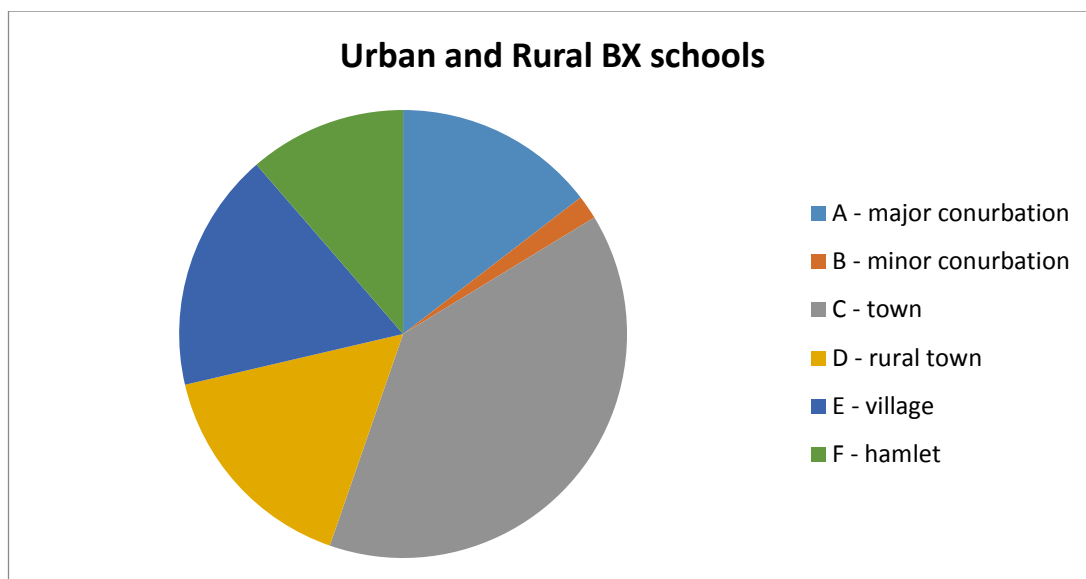
I also looked at the urban-rural split within each region. It is clear that the very large number of rural schools in Wales skews the results to some extent – see Figure 3-7. However, there were also significant numbers of rural schools in the North West: outside London, this is the region with the largest proportion of its population living in urban areas (89.4%)[4], so this is an unexpected result. Also unexpected was the large number of rural schools in both the East of England and the South East. It is hard to draw any firm conclusion from this data, except perhaps to say that major conurbations appear to be an under-exploited mission field for Bible Explorer.

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[4] www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/rural-urban-analysis/index.html. Accessed at 18.28 on 29.07.2014.

England & Wales schools urban/rural by region
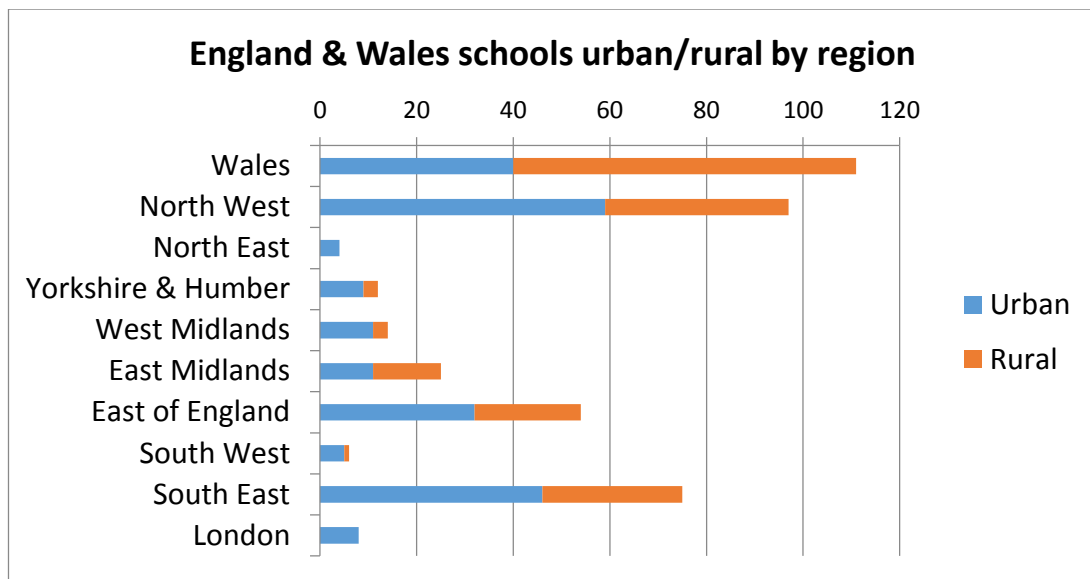
Just as the postcodes provided interesting information, so too did the names of the schools. It was evident from a number of these that the feedback form had come from a Church school. Excellent education websites in England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland[5] made it straightforward to research the religious affiliation of schools in these regions. The Church of England is the largest single provider of schools in England, being responsible for 25% of all primary and middle schools[6]. In Wales, there are almost 300 Church schools, details of which are listed on an inter-denominational website[7]. Figure 3-8 shows the number of faith and other schools which have taken BX, according to region. In total, 39% of schools had a faith background. In England, nearly half of all participating schools were faith-based: the majority of these were Anglican, with a small number of Roman Catholic schools. The situation was different in Wales, where faith schools were a small minority of the BX schools. The highest figure is found in Eire, however, where all bar one of the BX schools had a faith background. Over a quarter of these were affiliated with the Protestant Church of Ireland; this is perhaps unsurprising given the biblical basis of the course. It was not possible to

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[5] www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools.html. Accessed at 16.04 on 1.08.2014.
[6] https://www.churchofengland.org/education/church-schools-academies.aspx. Accessed 19.40 on 30.07.2014.
[7] www.churchschoolswales.org/english/parents/index.htm. Accessed at 16:20 on 1.08.2014

ascertain the faith status of schools taking Bible Explorer in Northern Ireland or the Channel Islands.

Schools - faith and non-faith
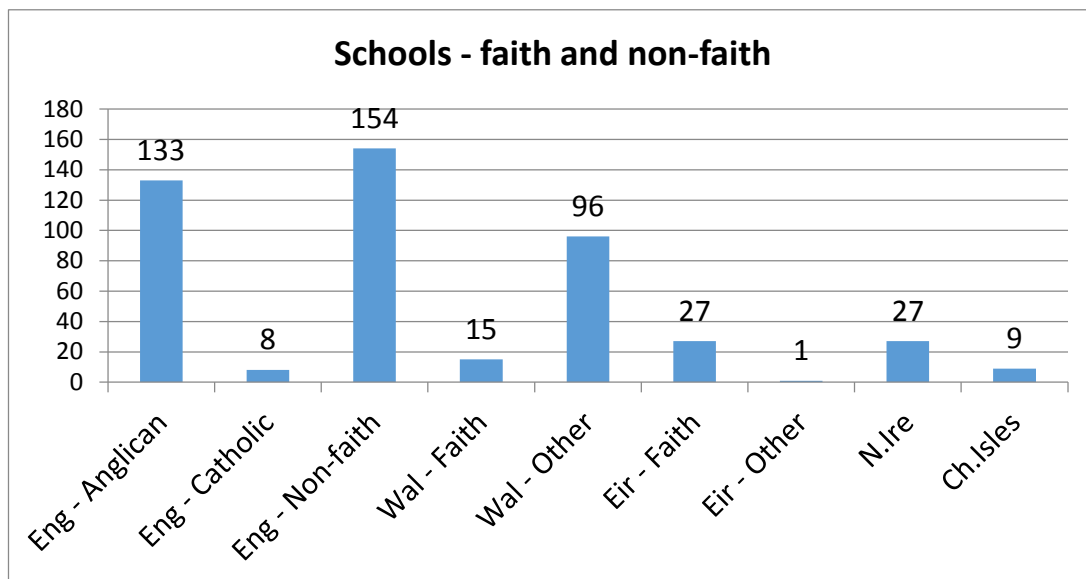
The 470 schools covered by the feedback forms for 2012 and 2013 gave BX presenters access to just under 28,000 pupils. BX records show that 32,760 children were taught in the calendar year 2012, and a further 29,980 were taught in the calendar year 2013. This gives a total of 62,740 pupils for the two-year period covered by the feedback forms. The feedback covers just under half (45%) of all the children who experienced Bible Explorer during that time. The BX office calculates the overall number of school pupils who have seen the programme since it began 30 years ago: at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, this figure stood at 551,077 children.

The Presenters - Background information

The 692 feedback forms give information about 135 Bible Explorer presenters. The most active of these taught 2,264 pupils over the two-year period covered by the forms. Figure 3-9 shows the number of pupils taught by each individual BXer.

Number of children taught by presenter: total 27,750
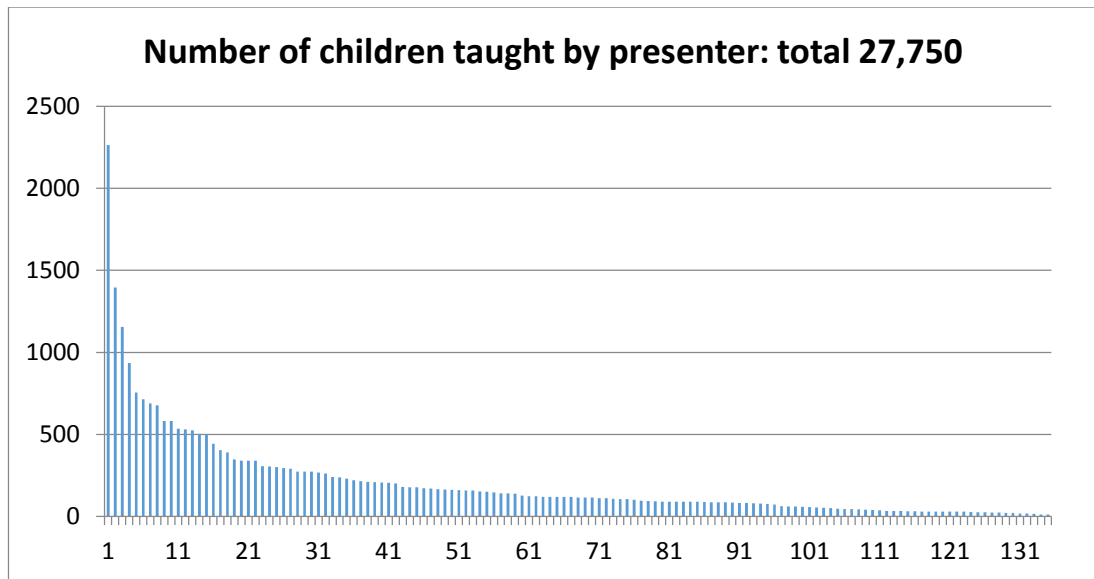
As noted earlier, the impact of the most active presenters is considerable: the number of children who come into contact with the programme would be significantly reduced without their contribution. Figure 3-10 shows that the five most active BXers taught a quarter of the total number of children.

Figure 3-10 shows the impact of the most active BXers

Number of children taught by presenter

6504

9248

5838

6160

Top 5
Next 10
Next 20
Rest (102)
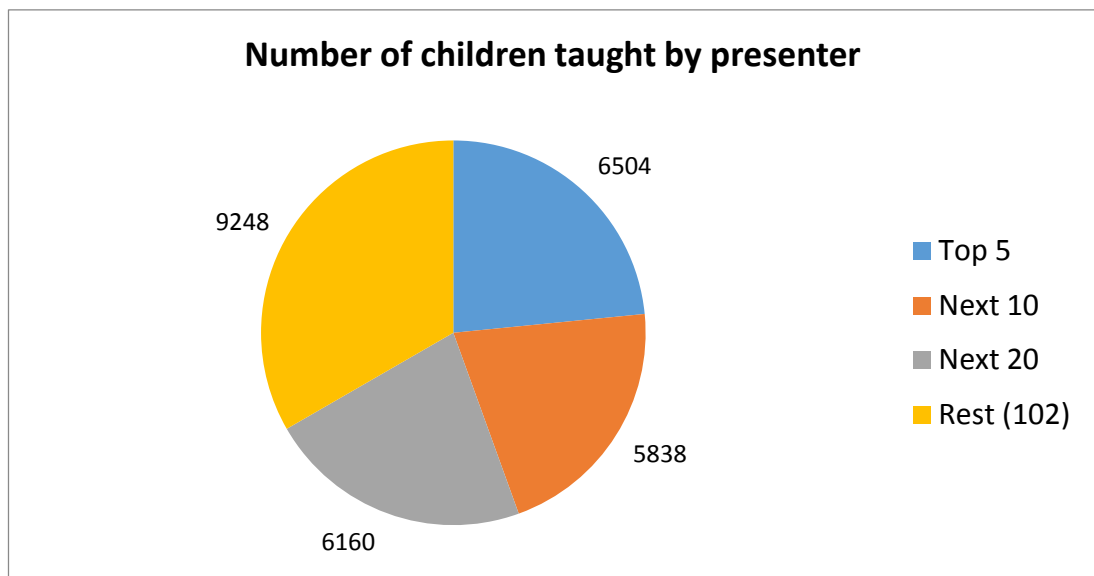
The majority of presenters were working in England, and about one fifth of the total number were based in Wales. The Welsh and Irish BXers were particularly active. In England, each

presenter works, on average, in three schools[8]. In Wales, this increases to an average of 4.4 schools per presenter. In Eire, the figure is 5.6 schools but the most prolific presenters are in Northern Ireland, where each BXer teaches in an average of 9 schools. Figure 3-11 shows the number of BXers in each region. These statistics do not include partners or teams who work together. There were no feedback forms returned for the seven Scottish presenters.

Figure 3-11: Number of BXers within each region
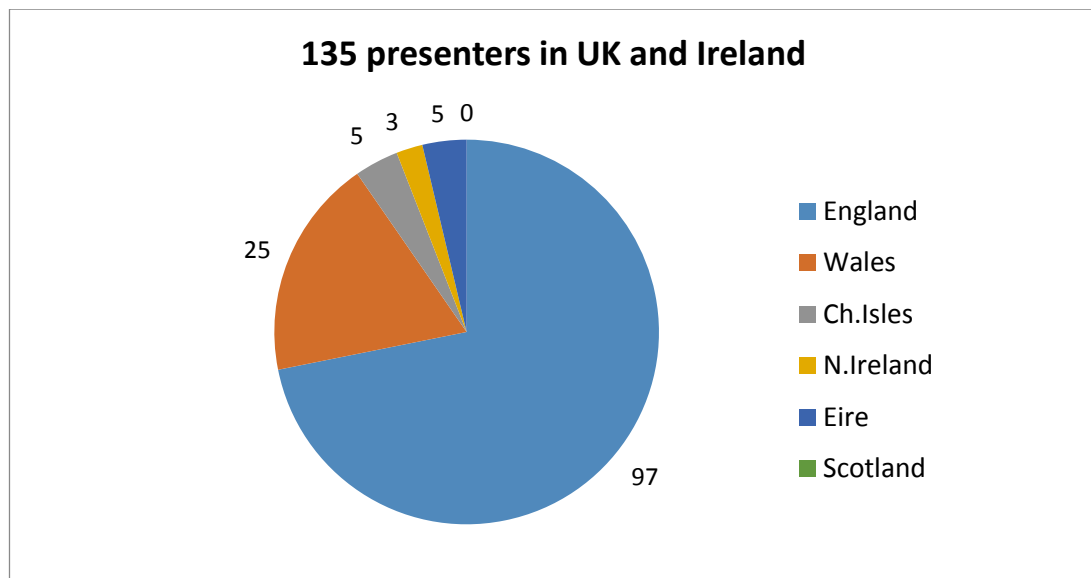
The Bible Explorer office files the feedback forms according to the presenter who taught the sessions. The folder for each individual records the dates when that presenter trained for both the Old and New Testaments. According to the regional training manual, "a Presenter's first year of teaching shall be considered a trial period for the benefit of both Bible Explorer and the new Presenter. A tentative length of commitment from each new Presenter is two years."[9] In addition, BXers are required to teach at least ten full Old Testament presentations before any training in the New Testament can be considered[10]. This data enabled me to see not only the length of time that a presenter had been active, but also the length of time that had elapsed between training for the Old Testament and training to teach the New. Figure 3-12 shows the number of presenters who trained for either Old or New Testament in each year from 1996 (the earliest date in the records) through to 2012. Most had clearly taught

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[8] This includes the figures for the North West and the West Midlands.
[9] *BX OT Manual,* 51.
[10] *BX OT Manual,* 50.

for more than the two years to which they had initially committed themselves. Some information was missing: the year of training was given for only 132 of the 135 presenters, and of these, two were missing the year of their New Testament training. Of the 132 Old Testament trained BXers, 66 were also New Testament trained – exactly half. For this group, New Testament training took place between one and eight calendar years after Old Testament training, with an average difference of two years (whether measured by median, mode or mean).

Figure 3-12 shows the number of new presenters each year
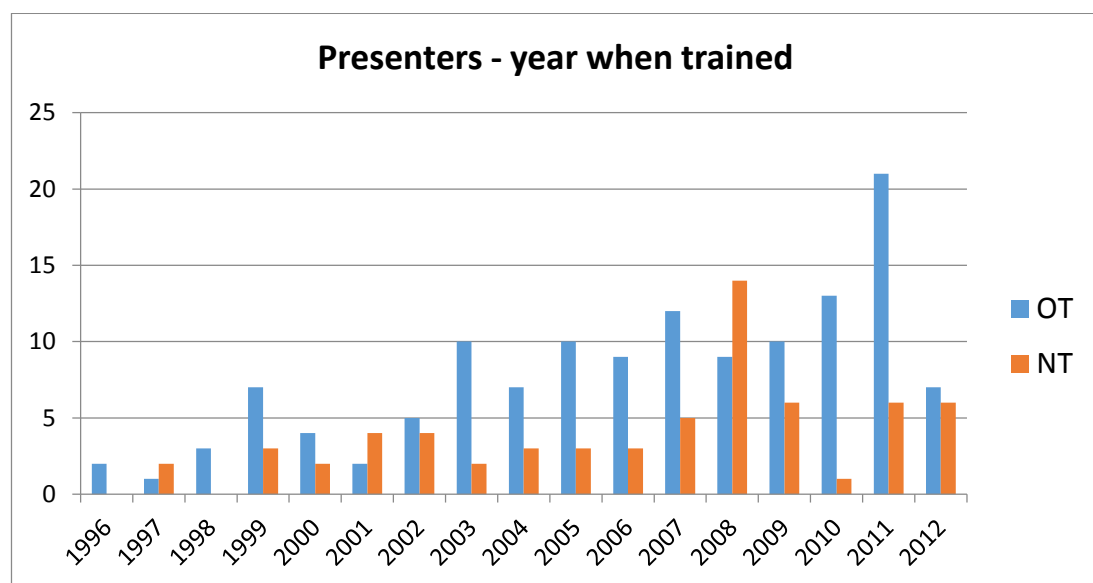
There are two types of feedback form in the sample. The newer forms include a request for a donation towards the running costs of Bible Explorer, estimated by the charity to be £3.00 per child taught. There were 454 of this new type of feedback form. There appear to be a variety of factors which might influence whether a school decides to make a gift and the amount of that gift. These include, for example, the size of the school, the number of children taught, and the school's location - schools in the South of England seem to give larger amounts than schools in the North. In addition, it seems reasonable to assume that a school would only give money if the BX presentations had been of some benefit to their pupils. Individual presenters are not told how much money has been raised from the schools in which they teach. Although an econometric analysis would provide further information about these variables, this is outside the scope of this research project. In broad terms, where there is a record on the feedback form of a request for a donation, 83% of schools chose to respond with a gift.

The Presenters – Qualitative Data

As well as factual information, the feedback form contains two qualitative questions. Staff are asked what their personal reaction was to Bible Explorer and to describe the reaction of their class. Having looked closely at this information, it became clear that the responses fell into four categories. Some schools gave feedback that was both positive and effusive. The language used in these responses tends to contain superlatives, exclamation marks, extensive detail and enthusiastic descriptions of the presenter and/or the programme. An example of this type of response reads as follows[11]:

What was your personal reaction?	How would you describe your pupils' reaction?
We cannot praise Keith[12] highly enough for his professionalism, enthusiasm, dedication, empathy and subject knowledge. He quickly established a rapport with all 82 children (no mean feat!) and maintained their interest and concentration for the whole session. He is a real asset and we would not hesitate to recommend him to other schools.	All of the children were totally and actively engaged in every session and their ability to remember both the actions and the key words was most impressive. They thoroughly enjoyed listening to Keith's delivery of the stories as he constantly brought them to life. They also loved the competitive element of some of the activities!

Some feedback was positive, but not effusive in tone. The following excerpt is an example of this type of response[13]:

What was your personal reaction?	How would you describe your pupils' reaction?
Excellent presentation. Well resourced. Always on time.	Thoroughly enjoyed sessions. Completed worksheets.

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[11] Photo #48. A photographic record was taken of all the documents made available to me at the Bible Explorer office. I have referenced the feedback forms by their photo number to maintain the anonymity of the presenters and to aid efficiency.

[12] Please note that all names have been changed to protect the identity of the individual concerned.

[13] Photo #778

The third category was the mixed response, in which positive comments were tempered by some criticism. An example of this type of response reads as follows[14]:

What was your personal reaction?	How would you describe your pupils' reaction?
Children enjoyed the interaction. There was good follow up material to help consolidate their learning. Very enthusiastic about early sessions but this waned towards the end – a bit repetitive.	Positive – they said: Actions help you remember. Fun way of explaining serious things. Good to be part of it rather than just listening. Booklets are a good way of showing what we learned and could manage them well. Would recommend it for another group.

The final category was the critical response, of which the following is an example:

What was your personal reaction?	How would you describe your pupils' reaction?
The sessions were a good way to engage the children in the Bible. We feel that it is pivotal that the sessions are punctual and keep to time as it has an impact on the afternoon and hence the curriculum.	The children's reaction was mixed. They enjoyed the actions, however, due to the length of the sessions, they lost interest before the end.

Figure 3-13 shows the number of feedback forms in each of the four categories. The vast majority (89.5%) of responses were assessed as positive or positive-and-effusive. Seven feedback forms are described as 'blank'. Although these forms gave details of the school, presenter, number of children taught, and whether the sessions were Old or New Testament, the two qualitative questions about the reactions of the teachers and pupils to the course were left unanswered.

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[14] Photo #786

Figure 3-13: Feedback forms by assessment category

Assessment: all 692 feedback forms

- Blank
- Critical
- Mixed
- Positive
- Positive and effusive
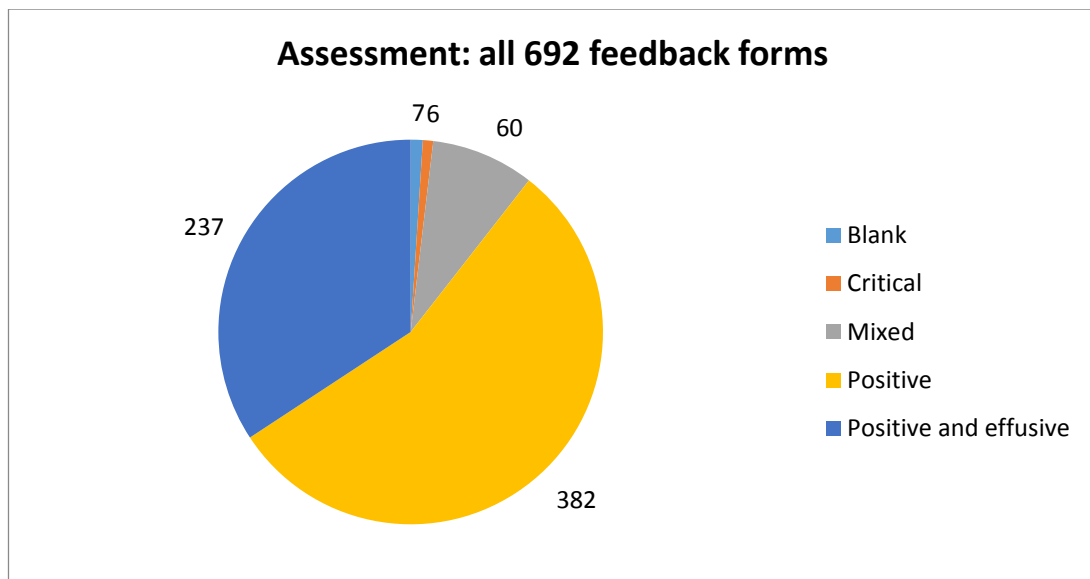
It was noted earlier (see Figure 3-10) that some presenters are extremely active and these individuals have a considerable impact on the number of children who are taught Bible Explorer. It is possible that their contribution is skewing the assessment totals given in Figure 3-13, in that these prolific presenters may also be the most successful in terms of the feedback they receive. Although using all the forms, without adjustment, measures aggregate pupil satisfaction, it is possible to reconfigure the data to give an equal weight to each teacher, thus reflecting the overall quality of the volunteer workforce. Details of 135 presenters are given in the feedback forms. I listed the results for each individual by assessment category and, from these, allocated an average score for each BXer. I took the median result where possible, but if that left a choice, I went for the mode, the most common result. Where this still failed to produce a clear answer, I took the lower option, for instance where only two results were given and both were different. Figure 3-14 shows the number of individual presenters in each of the four assessment categories, after making this adjustment. There has been a slight drop in the share of positive-and-effusive scores (and a corresponding increase in the share of positive scores) compared with the results from all the feedback forms, but, in broad terms, the proportions are little changed. This is an encouraging result for the charity, because it means that the positive feedback from schools is not dependent on a few stellar individuals, but instead reflects the quality of the volunteer workforce as a whole.

Assessment: all 135 volunteers
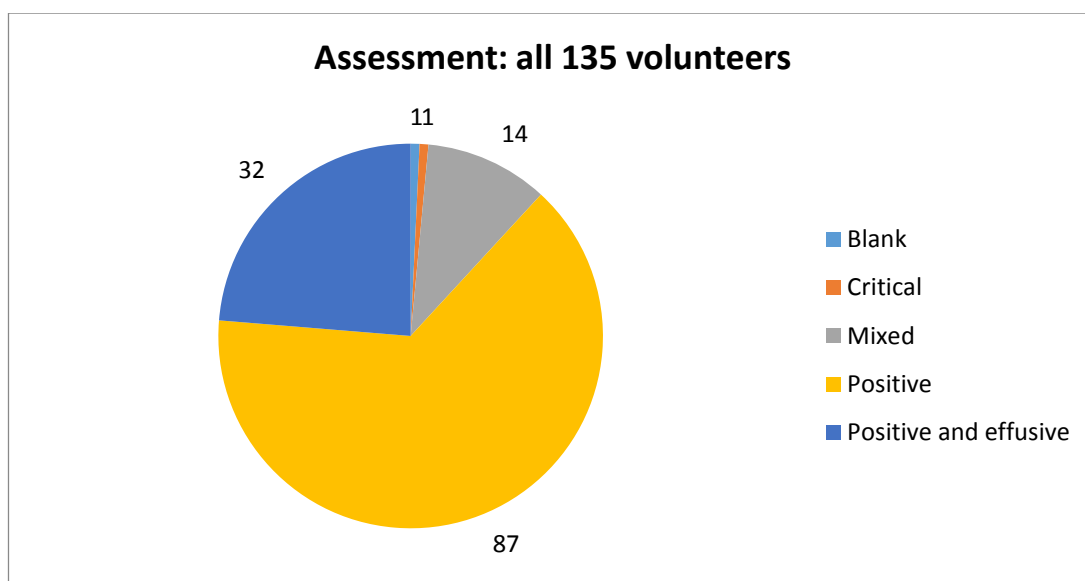
How successful is the course?
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I was conscious that the four categories used in my analysis are largely subjective, as are the teachers' comments. I was keen to find another way to look at this material that might be more objective. Reading through the replies again, I saw that there were a number of qualities regularly attributed to both the course and the presenters. I noted down the qualities mentioned in each feedback form and from this information, nine categories emerged, which covered all the data. These categories are detailed below. I have also included a selection of excerpts from the school feedback forms here. These not only serve as examples for each category, but also give a flavour of the feedback received from schools.

1) **Active Engagement**

This category covers all those comments which refer to the children's positive engagement with the programme. This includes the pupils' willingness to participate in the various activities provided, as well as their attitude and behaviour during the sessions. The children's questions and their enthusiastic anticipation of future classes were both assumed to be indicators of active engagement with the course. The excerpts below indicate the type of comment found in this category:

> 'Children look forward to lessons and eagerly participate in quizzes and selected worksheets to assess their learning.' (Photo #55)

'The children were really engaged throughout the sessions. Keen and actively participating in drama and memory recall activities.' (Photo #688)

'The children were really engaged in sessions – many wanted to ask extra questions at the end of sessions and did extra research.' (Photo #771)

'The Year 6 children came up with very deep questions.' (Photo #496)

'Very attentive, well behaved as they were engrossed and fully active mentally or energetically all through the lesson.' (Photo #137)

'They loved every minute. Even the harder to reach children joined in and, more importantly, learnt something.' (Photo #751)

'The pupils were all completely engaged – well done at Year 6!!' (Photo #707)

'100% engagement, motivation and enthusiasm. They really looked forward to the sessions each week.' (Photo #699)

'Children were very attentive and responsive. Children enjoyed the actions and were very keen to be part of the short drama segments. Due to the lively nature of the sessions the children kept their attention for the full hour of each session. Children would have quite happily carried on for longer than the five week programme.' (Photo #521)

'Pupils were engaged, enthusiastic when necessary and calm and thoughtful when indicated by Ian.' (Photo #71)

'The class can be challenging, however the highly skilled presenters engaged and captivated their interest.' (Photo #877)

'They cannot wait for the sessions! They thoroughly enjoy them and lap up all the information and stories. They are all able to access the lessons and are made to feel a special part of each one, taking part in the stories, acting out etc. They are all totally engaged and talk about them for weeks afterwards.' (Photo #942)

'The pupils enjoyed taking an active part in the sessions. They are already asking for New Testament sessions!' (Photo #80)

'All the children (who exhibit a wide range of needs) were engaged with the course. They responded very positively to the role play and series of actions. They looked forward to these sessions all week!' (Photo #76)

2) **Course Content**

This category covers all those comments which relate to the structure and content of the Bible Explorer course. I also included references to the age appropriateness of the teaching materials and to the planning of sessions. This seemed logical as these aspects of the programme are devised centrally by Walk through the Bible Ministries and not by the

individual presenters themselves. The following are examples of this type of comment and are characteristic of the feedback:

> 'Bible Explorer is a superb approach to provide children with an overview of the Bible.' (Photo #142)

> 'Sceptical beforehand but then very pleased with the interactive element; well presented, age appropriate slides and informative content. It matched and added further detail to previous RE topics we have covered.' (Photo #243)

> 'A superb course that truly inspired and motivated the children, helping them to learn the OT and progression from Creation to Christ.' (Photo #627)

> 'Good at encouraging children to think for themselves and consider Christianity.' (Photo #104)

> 'An excellent series of lessons. Full of relevant information, well taught using a variety of interactive ways. Appeals to different learning styles. I loved it. Excellent!' (Photo #655)

> 'Pitched at right level. Good balance of knowledge and spiritual development/questioning. Definite quality. Religious education and spiritual moral aspects of curriculum covered. Thank you.' (Photo #659)

> 'I liked that there were other religious viewpoints discussed.' (Photo #784)

> 'Excellent content and at the children's level.' (Photo #89)

> 'Excellent programme to help children move from understanding random Bible stories to seeing the Bible in context. Well delivered by knowledgeable staff.' (Photo #708)

> 'Refreshing change to Bible education.' (Photo #751)

> 'Storytelling is a good way to explore the Bible.' (Photo #784)

> 'A very well-planned set of 5 lessons.' (Photo #820)

> 'I thought it was fascinating that all of the Old Testament could be covered in just 5 weeks and it kept the children interested and intrigued throughout. They enjoyed the content of the lessons, especially the hand actions and the drama.' (Photo #402)

> 'The link between actions, words and events encouraged all the children to participate in a lively way. The repetition and extensions of the Bible story every week ensured the children remembered lots of names from the Old Testament.' (Photo #396)

> 'I was delighted with the format/content and skill of presentations.' (Photo # 841)

> 'Having the full overview of the Old Testament is amazing. It has brought the Bible stories to life...' (Photo #69)

'The lessons were well structured, delivered and appropriate to the age and ability of the children.' (Photo #431)

'A vast amount of knowledge shared in a fun way. Very beneficial to pupils.' (Photo #890)

'A wonderful series of lessons about the Bible. Very valuable educationally and great fun!' (Photo #937)

'It is well organised, resourced and delivered. It covers many areas of the RE curriculum and engages all the pupils thoroughly.' (Photo #88)

'Children learn so much detail – which is not often explained in Children's Bible Story books!' (Photo #537)

'Children have learnt a great deal during Steve's visits to year 5 and 6. The majority of them have not heard these stories before.' (Photo #495)

3) **Delivery Method**

The characteristic method of delivering Bible Explorer is closely bound up with the programme's content, as some of the previous feedback comments have indicated. The lively and interactive delivery method is an integral part of the programme's appeal to children and aims to maximise learning outcomes for all pupils. A wide variety of different teaching strategies are used to engage the children, including drama, music[15] and puppets[16]. This approach caters not only for a range of learning styles but also mixed abilities. I included general comments about the inclusivity of the programme under the heading of 'delivery method'. However, more specific references to particular needs were categorised as 'diversity issues'. Where a session has been described as 'fun' or 'enjoyable', I have taken this to refer to the way in which the session was delivered. The following are typical comments in this category:

'A clear and engaging way to teach part of the RE syllabus. Very enjoyable for the children.' (Photo #562)

'Fantastic, multi-sensory sessions. Something for all types of learner. Good for those with memory problems, too. ☺' (Photo #148)

'An amazing, inspiring session. Lots of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning.' (Photo #411)

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[15] See, for example, Photos #243, #453
[16] See, for example, Photos #723, #317, #319

'A fantastic programme, an innovative way to teach the Old Testament. A range of teaching strategies that appealed to the various learning styles within the class.' (Photo #685)

'Excellent delivery that captured the children's imagination/interest. Thoroughly enjoyed by all. Cannot praise more highly the course and the methods used to teach the children so much.' (Photo #155)

'The lessons were stimulating, interactive and very informative. The level of preparation was extremely high with use made of PowerPoint, props and costumes to bring the stories to life and to help them remember detail.' (Photo #521)

'Loved the enthusiasm and depth of knowledge conveyed. Great storytelling skills.' (Photo #199)

'Enjoyment is obvious, but not at the expense of learning.' (Photo #206)

'As a Christian I was impressed how engaged the children were and how much I enjoyed the activities. As a fellow teacher, I found the methods excellent – lovely to have RE as fun, exciting, and everyone engaged whilst learning.' (Photo #216)

'Hand signs were a creative and memorable way to learn about the people, history and geography of the Bible.' (Photo #599)

'A novel way of presenting Bible stories. A very child-friendly and modern approach to teaching the Scriptures. (Photo #261)

'Inclusive and lively approach to learning about the Bible. Children enjoy memorising names and events by using hand actions. Smartboard used to share maps of Holy Land and short video clips all help to stimulate and reinforce learning.' (Photo #55)

'The children learnt a great deal and were clearly enthused and motivated (it's hard not to be by Mark!). I was amazed by how much they remembered, especially as Mark's teaching style is so different to methods we use in school!' (Photo #660)

'I found the style used to teach quite a weighty subject very good... The pupils especially enjoyed the more kinetic style of the activities, which aided motivation and learning, regardless of ability. (Photo #273)

'Surprised each week, excited about each lesson, enjoyed each lesson, engaged during lesson.' (Photo #12)

'It was pitched at an appropriate level for the children. The use of props and drama engaged the children and so they were learning while having fun! Very good sessions.' (Photo #341)

'Seeing my pupils being so absorbed was delightful… The interactive style of each lesson meant all pupils took part – which was great to see.' (Photo 42)

'The lessons were never dull and he catered for all areas of learning…' (Photo #376)

'The children loved the hands on nature of the lessons.' (Photo #823)

'A brilliant experience for the children!! Sam was able to hold the children's attention through his lively and unique approach.' (Photo #82)

'Bible Explorer… provides a safe way for all children, regardless of ability, to learn and succeed.' (Photo #510)

'Even the less able retained information from the sessions due to the repetition and enjoyable presentation style.' (Photo #941)

'The children learnt about the Old Testament without actually realising it. It appealed to all learning styles, this approach to learning was very inclusive.' (Photo #6)

'Drama appeals to all children and helps to engage 'restless' learners.' (Photo #784)

4) **Diversity Issues**

A number of teachers commented on the appeal of Bible Explorer to a wide range of children. School communities are always made up of individuals with differing needs; sometimes pupils will come from varied cultural and religious backgrounds as well. The BX programme is designed to be as inclusive as possible. Feedback forms addressed various aspects of diversity; the following excerpts indicate the range of this category.

'It was fun and engaging for all pupils – approaches and methods used ensured all (SEN) pupils included (visual, audio, kinaesthetic). Some 'difficult' storylines dealt with sensitively and appreciatively.' (Photo #536)

'The children thoroughly enjoyed the sessions and every single individual was successful in learning the signs and symbols taught. Learning difficulties seemed to 'disappear' as everyone managed to take part and remember various parts as the sessions were so practical.' (Photo #642)

'Signing was v helpful for SEN/EAL children – all pupils had access to learning.' (Photo #440)

'It helps with religious tolerance.' (Photo #618)

'The presentation appealed to a mixed race group and was enjoyed by pupils of other faiths.' (Photo #25)

'They eagerly awaited each session and were able to learn/remember the signs. Boys, girls, more able and less, different cultures all participating to work as a team to remember the stories and their signs. Good range of appeal to different learners. Opened up the Bible as something accessible.' (Photo #216)

5) **Implications for teaching RE**

This was a wide category, covering the impact that Bible Explorer has had on the teaching of religious education in particular primary schools. It included comments from teachers about

their own professional development; changing attitudes to RE; the long term nature of the relationship between a presenter and a school; and the faith development that has taken place for some children as a result of the course. Typical comments read as follows:

'The children learnt far more than through conventional RE lessons.' (Photo #943)

'RE has become a positive subject the children look forward to.' (Photo #921)

'The pupils could apply their understanding of the Bible to the work they have done on Judaism and impressed the people at the Synagogue with their knowledge. They are motivated to learn more.' (Photo #924)

'It was very beneficial to both myself and the children to observe/listen to an RE specialist.' (Photo #434)

'This is a valuable part of the RE curriculum.' (Photo #429)

'The children have learned and retained a lot of information – it's certainly put RE in the spotlight and made it fun… Definitely recommend this – just don't know how I'm going to follow it!' (Photo #420)

'Nigel does a wonderful job in our school year after year. His lessons are an enormous benefit and addition to our religious programme.' (Photo #405)

'Many children have researched the Old Testament themselves, set up their own prayer groups at playtimes, and clearly loved Mark's teaching of the 'Word'. I'd recommend him as a knowledgeable, caring, enthusiastic Bible teacher.' (Photo #697)

'This work has prompted loads of discussions and exploring of localities on the internet – some children VERY curious, interested.' (Photo #613)

'Changed [the children's] perceptions on the Bible and RE.' (Photo #693)

'It is a great way in to Bible studies.' (Photo #214)

'Both members of staff found it beneficial to their own RE knowledge, learning new stories and how to deliver them.' (Photo #32)

'My Bible knowledge has increased as a result! … The prospect of the lesson is met with cheers. Many of the children have been reading the Bible in class and at home.' (Photo #546)

'A great asset to RE teaching…' (Photo #603)

'I was impressed with how much the children got out of the lessons. It was knowledge I would not have been able to give pupils.' (Photo #553)

'Very glad to have a Christian input in school and to gain a good understanding.' (Photo #198)

'Gave me some great ideas for teaching RE.' (Photo #503)

'Outstanding!! Mark George is one of the highlights of our week, the way he teaches RE creatively to the children is just incredible! I was so impressed by the way he makes the Bible current and relevant for our children.' (Photo #63)

6) **Negative Comments**

Of the 692 feedback forms, 66 contained negative comments. After a close reading of these forms, it became apparent that the complaints could be grouped under ten different headings. The most frequently expressed criticism was that sessions were too long and "tended to drag"[17]. This echoes the presenters' own concerns about timing, which came to light in the survey[18]. Survey respondents also expressed their anxiety about classroom management, but this was only a very small cause of complaint by schools, with just four mentions in the feedback forms. A number of negative comments focussed on the course content, particularly the lack of "life application"[19] and "time for discussion"[20] in the sessions. One teacher wrote, "I feel it could be tailored more closely to the curriculum, particularly with regards to learning from religion."[21] This concern was also raised by some of the interviewees, as well as in the survey responses. Several teachers noted that they "preferred the OT stories to the NT"[22] and that children were less interested in the New Testament because "they knew most of what was covered and in more depth."[23] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the latter comments came from a Church of England school. Again picking up on an issue raised in the survey, one school noted that 'the New Testament signs are more difficult to remember and understand than the Old Testament signs.'[24]

Given how lively the delivery method can be, the number of negative comments about delivery was unexpected. These can be summed up by the phrase, "More child participation needed"[25]. The lack of engagement seemed to be connected with "the length of the

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[17] Photo #164
[18] See Question 6: 'Please describe anything you have found particularly difficult or challenging about teaching Bible Explorer.'
[19] Photos #595 & #601
[20] Photos #362 & #97
[21] Photo #419
[22] Photos #948, 201
[23] Photos #704 & #705
[24] Photo #30
[25] Photo #772

sessions"[26], especially for "the younger children"[27]. Given that the programme is specifically designed for children in school Years 5 and 6, it is perhaps unfair to criticise sessions for being too long for Year 4 children, as one school did[28]. The worksheets attracted some critical feedback, too. Some teachers would like to see the written work completed during the BX lesson, under the supervision of the BX presenter[29]. Others wanted the BX booklet to address a wider range of abilities, with a challenging question to make the children "think philosophically"[30] and some easier questions "as the level was a little too high."[31]

A category which needs some explanation is "presenter issues". The complaints grouped under this heading were varied, but all focussed on the behaviour or skills of the particular BXer. Punctuality was raised, along with the requirement by a school in Wales that the presenter speak Welsh. Several teachers commented that, although children enjoyed going to the front to act out a story, they "would like turns to be fair (e.g. chart used)."[32] Figure 3-15 shows the number of negative comments in each of the ten categories.

Figure 3-15: Detailed breakdown of negative comments

Negative comments by category

- Delivery method: 17
- Timing: 22
- Too much information: 6
- Lack of engagement: 11
- Behaviour management: 4
- Course content: 18
- Worksheets: 9
- Class size: 3
- Presenter issues: 6
- Too many handsigns: 3

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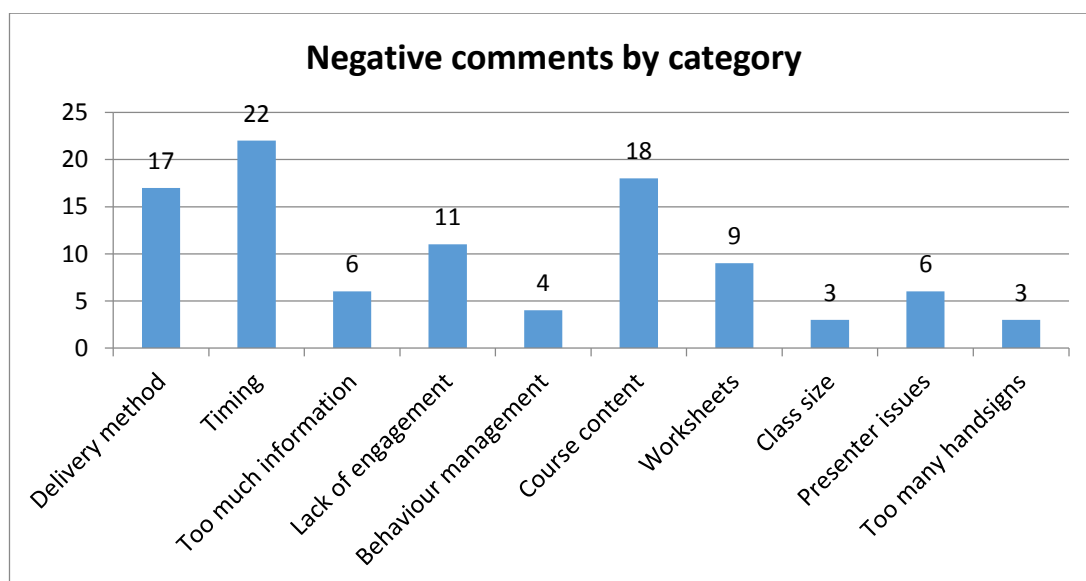
[26] Photo #663
[27] Photo #37.
[28] Photo #239
[29] Photo #434, for example.
[30] Photo #5
[31] Photo #4
[32] Photo #103, for example.

7) **Positive Learning Outcomes**

Once again, the comments that follow are characteristic of the feedback in this category. If Bible Explorer is to be more than entertainment, it is essential that sessions generate positive learning outcomes for the children. School feedback indicates that pupils do indeed learn from the programme, with many showing "a great recall of all the things they have covered."[33] Some are stimulated to read the Bible for themselves. Others benefit from increased confidence[34] and the opportunity to demonstrate their new skills in assembly[35], sometimes in front of their parents[36]. Working with an older presenter was also seen as a bonus[37]. A number of schools noted that Bible Explorer "really brought out the best" in some of their pupils.[38]

> 'The children continue to surprise me with the way the movements help them to remember so much.' (Photo #148)

> 'The children cannot believe how much they have learnt in 5 weeks. They have gained a more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the Bible that will stay with them for life.' (Photo #145)

> 'All children regardless of ability can retell the Testament through actions!' (Photo #209)

> 'I did Bible Explorers myself in Year 6 and still remember some of it now. I feel the children will do too!' (Photo #566)

> '… Developed a deep and retentive memory for the people mentioned in the sessions AND the order in which they came. Keen to learn more.' (Photo #41)

> 'The pupils enjoyed joining in and being part of the stories and will doubtless remember them because of this.' (Photo #628)

> 'By acting as the various characters, they were able to understand the stories better.' (Photo #229)

> 'They eagerly volunteered to participate and soaked up the information like sponges! … They have assimilated a vast amount of knowledge of the Old Testament. (Photo #261)

> 'Good understanding due to repetition of the stories and actions.' (Photo #16)

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[33] Photo #937
[34] Photo #932, for example.
[35] Photos #486, #877, #477, #151, #485, #486, #476
[36] Photo #478
[37] Photo #366, for example.
[38] Photo #878

'Pupils feel proud of the growing knowledge and understanding of the Bible and apply this to other aspects of their life.' (Photo #696)

'Our pupils loved the whole experience and the learning has had lasting impact.' (Photo #700)

'…The storytelling/drama technique was a refreshing change from written responses – it really developed their confidence.' (Photo #286)

'It provides an excellent opportunity for them to interact with a person from a different generation.' (Photo #312)

'I feel the children have become more interested in the stories of the Bible and will pick up a Bible and read it. Before Simon finished, I have noticed one girl reading a book of Bible stories which I bought and put into the classroom library.' (Photo #726)

'The children benefit from hearing stories from the Bible in order to make their own informed opinions.' (Photo #303

'It was good for the children to perform and display their learning of the symbols in assembly.' (Photo #331)

'Very impressed with how much the children learnt and could remember weeks later.' (Photo #353)

'As always, it is fascinating to see the effect BE has on the pupils.' (Photo #93)

'They love these sessions and they always have a huge impact on not just attitudes but their Scripture knowledge too.' (Photo #67)

8) **The Quality of the Volunteer**[39]

It was clear from the feedback forms that many schools have an extremely positive relationship with their BX presenters and hold them in high regard. BXers have impressed teaching staff with their "passion"[40], "energy"[41] and "great rapport with the children."[42] They are also "well organised"[43], "professional"[44] and demonstrate "good classroom

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[39] It became apparent from the survey responses that not all BX presenters are volunteers; some are paid children and schools workers, who use Bible Explorer as part of a range of services that they offer locally. However, I have chosen to use the term "volunteer" in this category in order to reflect the fact that BXers are not paid directly for delivering this course, nor are they employed by Walk through the Bible Ministries.

[40] Photos #813, #877, #503

[41] Photos #200, #841

[42] Photos #422, #672, #723

[43] Photos #18, #223, #232, #220, #516

[44] Photos #880, #757, #850, #197, #851

management"[45]. Several were described as "a delight to have in the classroom"[46]. Typical comments would include the following:

'Nicola was amazing. She had the ability to hold the attention of very lively 10/11 year old children. She was gentle and effective; the children really looked forward to her visits!' (Photo #222)

'Simon has the confidence to carry his message to the children. He delivers it in a fun way, is always in control and encourages questions. His own knowledge shines through.' (Photo #492)

'Total amazement. I was in awe of Emma's ability to capture the children in such a way.' (Photo #209)

'Really good story tellers. Presenters enjoy being with children and want the best for them.' (Photo #92)

'Hannah leads these sessions with great skill and integrity. They are outstanding.' (Photo #632)

'I thought Teresa had excellent subject knowledge and was very passionate in her delivery! She has a lovely rapport with the class and her enthusiasm reflects on the class and their enjoyment.' (Photo #39)

'I was so impressed by Teresa's enthusiasm and her depth of faith which shone through every visit.' (Photo #263)

'Very impressed at his style – entertaining and informative, whilst maintaining discipline. He presented the stories really well and was very knowledgeable.' (Photo #734)

'Helen is a wonderful teacher – so easy to work with – she makes the Bible come to life for all the girls.' (Photo #730)

'Neil is extremely child-centred and has done a huge amount of planning to help with the children's learning. His approach is good humoured, fun and interactive. I have really enjoyed working with him.' (Photo #337)

'Evelyn was a great presenter – so informed and delivered facts in a clear and interesting way. What an asset this term!' (Photo #775)

'She was interested in the children's questions and always answered them sensitively.' (Photo #357)

'The presenter was organised, helpful and accommodating.' (Photo #36)

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[45] Photos #929 & #43, #508, #504, #908, #929
[46] Photos #105, #379, #880

'Extremely motivating! Well-presented, excellent organisation. Wonderful speaker.' (Photo #793)

'I love Rev Simmons! He has the pupils' attention from start to finish and entertains and educates us all in one!' (Photo 808)

'We look forward to seeing Nigel every week… He is a lovely, friendly man.' (Photo #790)

'We all agree that we absolutely loved Bible Explorer, for an elderly bloke he is very good with children. He has a very good sense of humour and has a funny way of remembering things. We have learnt loads!' (Photo #366)

'Amazed!! The children remembered it all, due to the enthusiasm/youth of the provider and the actions given…' (Photo #926)

'He is an inspirational teacher.' (Photo #373)

'Nathan always puts his heart and soul into the teaching of the Bible.' (Photo #832)

'Loved it – enthralled, engaged, and excited by the stories/plays/songs/actions. Absolutely loved Mr Williams!' (Photo #481

'We love having Annie in our school – she has become a much loved and valued part of our team!' (Photo #67)

9) **The Worksheets**

This category was unexpected. However, a number of schools clearly appreciated the booklets that accompany the Bible Explorer course, describing them as "excellent supplementary worksheets"[47] and "easy to use"[48]. There are two versions of the written material available, one of which contains slightly more challenging activities than the other. Teachers reported that their pupils "enjoyed completing the workbooks"[49] and did so "with care"[50]. As was noted under the "Negative Comments" category, a couple of schools requested that "more time be given to completing or going through sheets each lesson."[51] Typical comments about the worksheets are as follows:

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[47] Photo #627
[48] Photo #657
[49] See, for example, Photos #37, #615, #265, #679, #344, #771, #73, #803, #370, #815, #843, #2, #887, #888, #434, #927, #929, #192, #529, #193, #162 and #261.
[50] Photo #267
[51] Photo #830 and #579.

'The worksheets are well presented and encourage the children to remember what they have been learning during the sessions. Thank you.' (Photo #620)

'The booklets were a good way to reinforce each lesson.' (Photo #331)

'The booklets as ever proved very popular and we gave some of our more able children the more challenging booklets which also went down well.' (Photo #767)

'The pupils were keen to complete the Bible Explorer books whenever they could!' (Photo #795)

'The children's Bible Explorer booklet provided useful follow up work.' (Photo #436)

'Follow on booklet was accessible to all.' (Photo #892)

'The follow up tasks were great for recapping and as a reference!' (Photo #440)

'The children were able to recall the events of Jesus' life easily and the workbook cemented their knowledge.' (Photo #906)

'Children enjoyed the practical nature of the lessons. They took great pride in working in their booklets.' (Photo #608)

'The worksheets provided the children with interesting activities.' (Photo #554)

'The children were excited about completing the booklets each week…' (Photo #519)

Successful Elements of the Course

Once I had identified the nine categories listed above, it was possible to use them to analyse the feedback forms in more depth. I went back to the original forms and allocated a score for each feedback form, based on the qualities described in that form. There were eight positive attributes to which schools had referred in their feedback, meaning the highest possible score on any single feedback form was eight. I gave any negative comments a score of minus one. This process resulted in every feedback form having a total score. I then looked at all the feedback forms which I had described as positive-and-effusive, and worked out the average score for that whole group. I repeated the process for the other three assessment types. The results were encouraging, as there was a clear numerical differentiation between the assessments. As I had hoped, and in line with my own qualitative analysis, the highest score went to the positive-and-effusive grouping, with descending scores for the remaining groups. I was interested to see that the average score for the mixed feedback forms was in

keeping with my own definition of a mixed assessment, described as mainly positive feedback, with some criticism. If the negative comment were to be removed from the mixed feedback, together with its associated score of minus one, what remains, according to my definition, would be a positive comment, with an average score of 2.6. The actual figure of 2.2 (calculated by taking away the minus score from the mixed total) is close enough to the positive average to suggest the internal consistency of the data.

Having used all the feedback forms up to this point, it seemed worthwhile to repeat the exercise again with regard to the individual volunteers. First of all, I calculated an average score for each presenter using the qualities listed in each of their feedback forms. Since, for each presenter, I had both an assessment category (e.g. positive-and-effusive), allocated as earlier described, and also an average score (e.g. 2.7), as explained above, it was then possible to calculate an average score for each assessment category. These results were similarly encouraging, with the same pattern of differentiation appearing. It seemed advisable to calculate the standard deviation for both these sets of results, as a measure of the volatility of the data. The outcomes were reassuring, as the standard deviations were small, indicating that the relationship between the qualitative assessments and the average scores was a stable one. The standard deviation for the results from the individual volunteers is smaller than that from the feedback forms, because the former figures had already been averaged, to take account of prolific presenters. Figure 3-16 details all the results in chart form.

Figure 3-16 shows the numerical differentiation between assessment types

	All 692 feedback forms		All 135 volunteers	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Critical	-0.8	0.4	-1.0	0.0
Mixed	1.2	1.1	1.5	0.7
Positive	2.6	1.0	2.8	0.6
Positive and effusive	3.6	0.9	3.3	0.6

I was interested to see which qualities were the most widely mentioned in the school feedback forms, and so I counted the total number of references to each of the eight positive attributes. As was noted in Figure 3-13, seven feedback forms were left blank, giving a working total of 685 forms. The quality most frequently praised by schools was the delivery method; this was raised by 88% of respondents. Figure 3-17 shows the number of comments each quality received, as a percentage of the total feedback.

Figure 3-17 shows how often each quality was mentioned across all the feedback forms
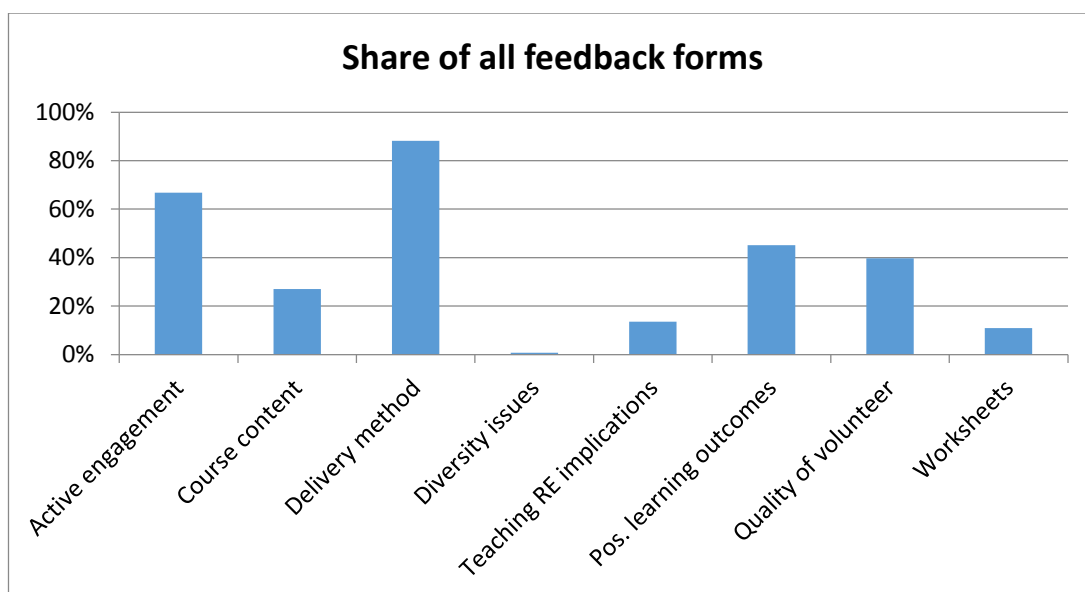
I was curious to see whether any qualities were associated with particular assessment groups. I once again sorted the feedback forms according to their four assessment headings, and counted how many times each positive quality was mentioned. The results are shown in Figure 3-18 below.

Figure 3-18 shows the number of each quality found in the four assessment groups

	Critical	Mixed	Positive	Effusive	Total
Active engagement	0	22	228	208	458
Course content	0	15	98	72	185
Delivery method	1	50	340	213	604
Diversity issues	0	0	3	2	5
Implications for teaching RE	0	1	34	58	93
Positive learning outcomes	0	16	154	139	309
Quality of volunteer	0	16	114	142	272
Worksheets	0	9	38	28	75
Total	6	60	382	237	685

I decided to leave aside the critical forms, as they represent unsuccessful sessions, and had a total score of only one positive comment[52]. In order to compare the scores for each quality across the remaining three assessment types, I calculated what percentage of the total number of feedback forms in that assessment group praised each individual quality. For example, using the table in Figure 3-18 above, 'Delivery method' was cited in 89% of all the 'Positive' feedback forms (340 out of 382 forms). The results were intriguing, in that the percentages for course content, delivery method, diversity issues and worksheets remained at a similar level regardless of whether the feedback forms were classed as mixed, positive or effusive. This suggests that these qualities are not particularly associated with the overall assessment scores – they remain largely constant across the three categories. It is tempting to surmise that this is because these qualities are determined centrally by Bible Explorer, and are thus available in all successful sessions, but further information would be needed to confirm this. Figure 3-19 shows the percentages of all feedback forms in the three assessment types mentioning these four qualities.

Figure 3-19 shows that 4 qualities are common to nearly all sessions
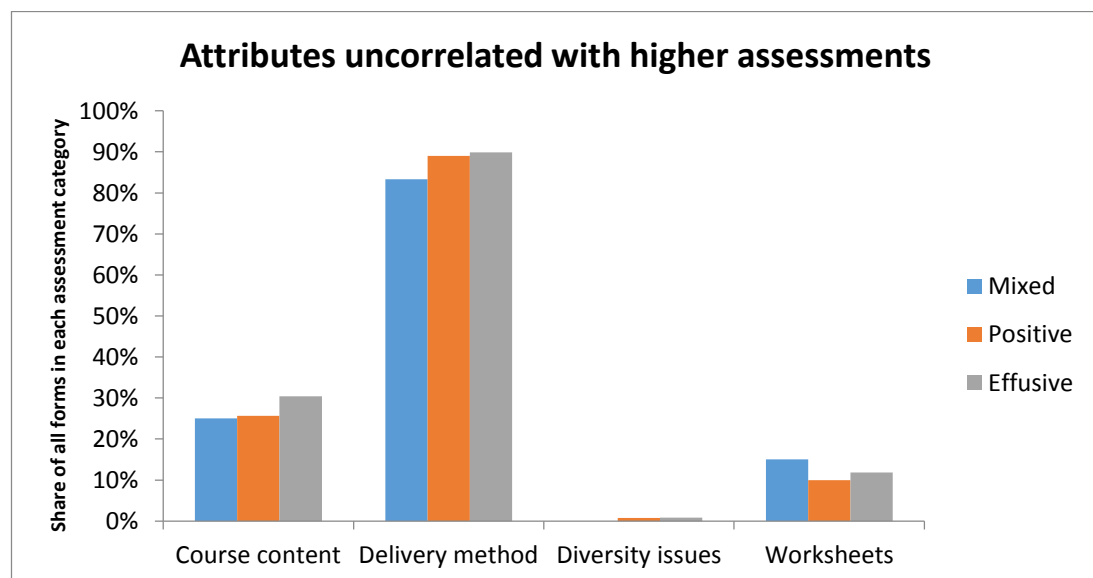
In contrast, active engagement, implications for teaching RE, positive learning outcomes and the quality of the volunteer do show an association with the overall assessment scores. The higher the percentage of these qualities that is mentioned in feedback, the higher the overall score, rising from 'mixed', through 'positive' to 'positive-and-effusive'. This is a significant

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[52] This was the complimentary remark about the delivery method.

finding. Figure 3-20 charts the percentages for each of these four positive attributes, showing the extent of the correlations with higher assessments.

Figure 3-20 shows that 4 qualities increase as sessions become more successful

Attributes correlated with higher assessments
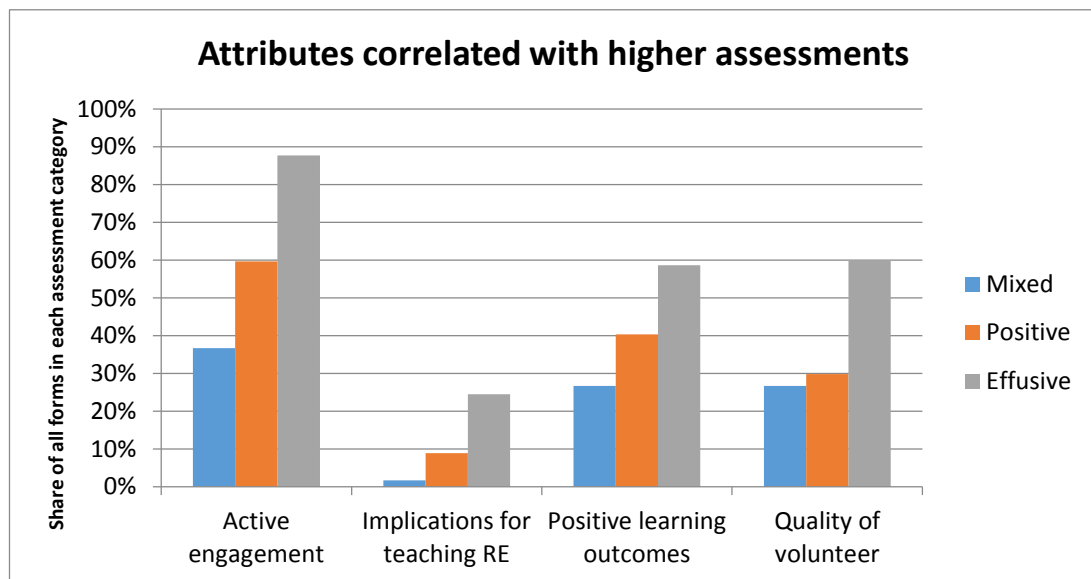
Having established a correlation between higher assessments and four of the qualities praised by schools, I was interested to see if class size had a similar influence on the overall scores. Each feedback form asks for the number of pupils who were taught Bible Explorer: there is a wide variation in class size. The largest number of children taught together was 180. The sessions were led by a single BXer who presented both the Old and New Testament programmes. The smallest number of pupils in a class was five and each child had severe learning difficulties. The average number of children in a BX class is 40. This figure is skewed somewhat by the handful of really large groups in the sample. The mode (30) and median (30) figures confirm this as both are significantly lower than the mean. It was clear that there is no correlation between class size and the assessment scores.

There were other aspects of the data still to be explored in relation to the assessment scores. Responses to the survey had implied that BX is particularly good for church schools and I was keen to see if the data supported this. There was a sufficiently large sample of English faith and community state schools to make a worthwhile comparison of their responses to Bible Explorer. We can see from the forms returned by church schools that 40% praised the programme effusively. A very small number (2% of the total) were critical of the course,

perhaps reflecting their expertise – or expectations - in the area of biblical teaching. No community schools returned critical feedback, but they did give notably more mixed feedback than the faith schools and they were also less effusive in their praise for the course. Figure 3-21 gives the figures across all four assessment types for both church and community schools in England.

Figure 3-21 shows that faith schools particularly enjoy BX
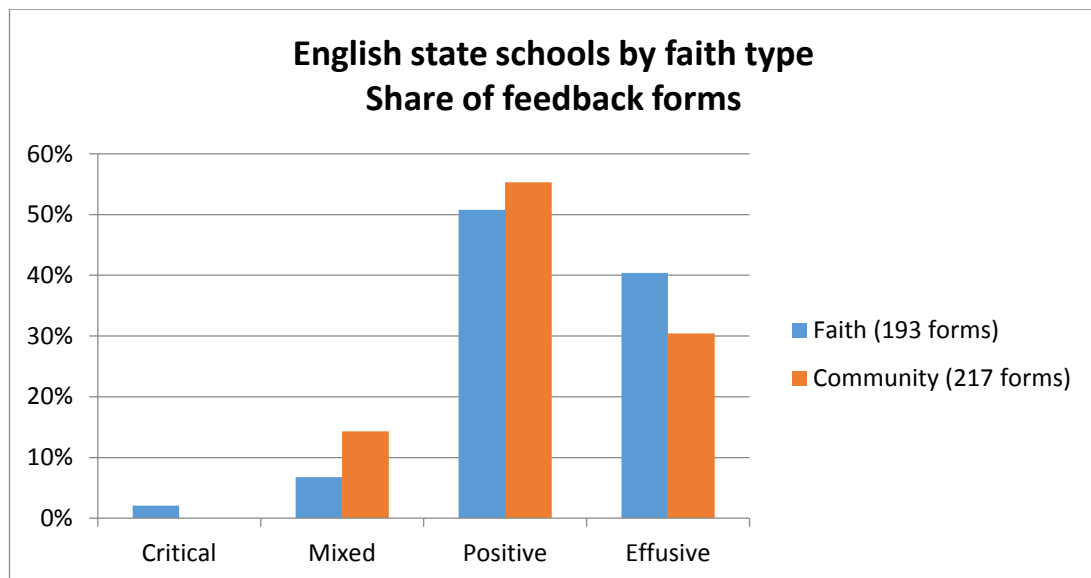
The school feedback forms indicate whether the sessions taught were Old or New Testament. As some forms were incomplete, the data set I used for this analysis consisted of 654 forms. Of these, the majority (410) reported on Old Testament sessions, with just under half that number (174) referring to the New Testament. The final 70 forms covered both sessions, taught together in the same school by the same presenter. Anecdotal evidence and survey data suggest that the Old Testament course is not only more widely taught, but also more popular than the New Testament. The school feedback forms confirm this, showing that the New Testament sessions are indeed less well received than the Old. The Old Testament course was effusively praised by 36% of schools, compared with a figure of 28% for the New Testament. The highest score, however, went to the two presentations in combination, with 43% of the total feedback being positive-and-effusive. It is unclear why this is the case, but perhaps staff feel grateful for the presenter's commitment to the school in such instances. Figure 3-22 charts these results.

Figure 3-22 shows that the OT course is more popular than the NT course

**Assessments by Testament taught
Share of feedback forms**

Legend:
- Old (410 forms)
- New (174 forms)
- Both (70 forms)

Categories: Critical, Mixed, Positive, Effusive
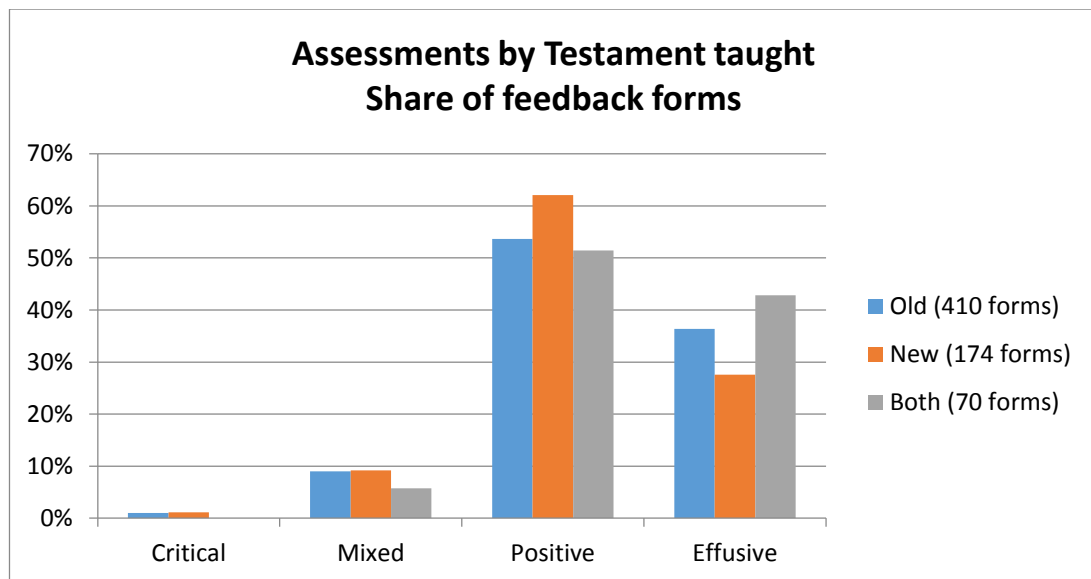
The Children's Feedback

Nineteen of the school feedback forms contained direct quotes from the children, in response to the question, 'How would you describe your pupils' reaction?' For methodological reasons, it would be inappropriate to place too much weight on the children's words. Not only were their responses filtered through the class teacher, but the power imbalance in the classroom makes it difficult for a child to be too critical, especially when a teacher has clearly enjoyed the sessions. However, with this caveat in mind, the responses are nevertheless interesting. All the children's comments refer to attributes already identified in the schools' feedback, although several qualities praised by staff are notably absent from the children's comments. As one might expect given the age of the youngsters, there is no mention of the content of the course or diversity issues, nor is the concept of active engagement raised. The children do mention the delivery method, however, with 51% of their feedback praising the acting, the props, the hand signs and the interactive nature of the sessions: "I liked it that we were taught actions and not just told the story"[53]. I was surprised that 21% of pupil feedback referred to the positive learning outcomes of the course. Children were clearly pleased with how much they had learnt as the following comment illustrates: "It was not easy to learn the actions but I did it and I'm proud!"[54] The staff feedback highlighted the positive benefits of showing this new learning

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[53] Photo #245
[54] Photo #587

to schoolmates in assembly and this was also raised by the children: "My favourite part was all of it and learning the signs and performing in front of people in the junior department"[55]. The presenter clearly has a significant impact on the children's enjoyment of the course, with a number of comments directly referring to the "amazing"[56] and "funny"[57] BXer who led the sessions. Interestingly, three classes specifically noted that the presenter "always chose fairly"[58] when asking for volunteers. The failure by some presenters to do this was one of the criticisms mentioned by teachers. I was not expecting to see the number of positive comments about the worksheets, which the children obviously enjoyed completing.

Some of the children's feedback referred to their enthusiasm for RE: "Yeah, it's RE today!"[59] Others noted the impact of the course, which one youngster described as "life changing"[60]. The presentations "encouraged me to read my Bible"[61] and were "inspiring"[62]. There was one feedback form[63] which contained some criticisms of the programme. Children said there was "sometimes too much sitting down. Can feel being talked at" and "enjoyed the booklet – but maybe less word searches?" The former complaint echoes staff dissatisfaction with sessions that were overly sedentary.

One school had sent in 'thank you' letters written by the children. Again, the delivery method is much praised, together with the "aswsome" BXer. One rather delightful letter read as follows:

> I thought your discribtion was fantastic and I want you to do it again I really liked it and you should be in London its so good so Mark please continue showing people the bible. Sinserly, Nathan.

Another school had devised its own pupil evaluation form, which asked the children four questions:

1. What did you enjoy about Bible Explorers?
2. What did you learn?
3. How did the sessions make you feel?
4. Would you like to do it again?

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[55] Photo #587
[56] Photo #379
[57] Photo #426
[58] Photo #353
[59] Photo #655
[60] Photo #300
[61] Photo #25
[62] Photo #6
[63] Photo #243

There were 20 children in the class and the most popular part of Bible Explorer was "acting things out"[64]. The children were able to recall specific stories that they had learnt (for example, that "Moses was found in a basket in a stream"[65]) and one lad reported that "I learnt so much more about the Old testament, in fact so much I can't fit it all on this paper!!!"[66] Another child commented that "I didn't learn anything because I don't believe in God"[67]. The sessions made the majority of the class feel "happy"[68]. However, it is easy as an adult to forget how powerful some Bible stories are: two children reported feeling "a bit sad"[69] and "a tiny tiny bit scared"[70]. Twelve children said they would like to do the course again; two said 'no' and the remainder were undecided. On the whole, the children's feedback, across the board, was very positive.

Would you recommend Bible Explorer?

As noted in the introduction, the Bible Explorer feedback forms contain a section asking staff whether "you could recommend us to other schools in your area". 92 forms contained a response to this request. Of these, 73 were happy to recommend the programme: "it will be a pleasure to promote this work"[71]. A variety of help was also offered. This included sending emails about BX to other Head teachers[72], telling "all my peers about your work"[73] and supplying references[74]. One school described how they had invited their BX presenter to attend a cluster meeting for local schools[75] and another school had invited their new Vicar "to watch the lesson"[76], after which she enthusiastically agreed to promote the programme. 37 forms gave the contact details for other schools which might be interested in BX.

The remaining 19 feedback forms did not contain offers of help. There were two reasons for this: either "all the schools in the area take part in Bible Explorer"[77] or contact had already

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[64] Photo #116
[65] Photo #127
[66] Photo #125
[67] Photo #129
[68] Photo #131
[69] Photo #130
[70] Photo #115
[71] Photo #198
[72] See, for example, Photo #221
[73] Photo #89
[74] Photo #306
[75] Photo #620
[76] Photo #494
[77] Photo #34

been made with possible schools by teachers [78] or "local clergy"[79]. There seems to be a pattern here, with schools making recommendations within their local cluster groups. This would fit with the finding that the number of schools hosting BX is related to the number of active presenters in a region. An active presenter is likely to work across a number of school clusters. If recommendations are made within these different clusters, then the programme will spread, possibly right across a particular region. Of course, this will always be dependent on the presenter's availability to deliver Bible Explorer whenever and wherever schools require it.

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[78] See, for example, Photo #182

[79] Photo #447

Chapter 4

Introduction

As a result of the Forum post on the BX website and the announcement in the BX newsletter of June 2013, a number of presenters contacted me, offering to share their experiences of presenting Bible Explorer. Of these, seven were within easy travelling distance and so a face-to-face interview was feasible. I would like to record my sincere thanks to all those who took part. The interviews were carried out between October 2013 and February 2014. Each lasted approximately one hour and they took place in a variety of settings. The location seemed to have little effect on the tone of the conversations, but did impact on the quality of the sound recording. All were serviceable, however. With the permission of the participant, each interview was recorded and later transcribed.

Given that I had no control over which presenters offered themselves for interview, there was a good range of volunteers. The group I interviewed consisted of two retired primary school teachers; two Church ministers with particular responsibility for children and families; a full-time Christian schools worker; and two volunteers with Christian educational Trusts. There were four women and three men; the youngest volunteer was in his late twenties and the oldest was in her seventies. Four of the seven interviewees are in the top twelve of all British BX presenters in terms of the number of children they have taught. The group thus gave me access to not only a wealth of classroom experience but also a variety of perspectives on the programme. All names have been changed in order to preserve the participants' anonymity.

The interview questions were designed both to complement the survey and to explore areas difficult to address in a questionnaire, such as the reasons for particular classroom choices. The questions are given in full in Appendix Two. The interviews were semi-structured. Each interviewee was asked the same open questions in roughly the same order, although this depended, in part, on the flow of the conversation. Only the basic outline of the questions was scripted, so although similar words and phrases were used, the language was not identical in each interview. For clarity, questions were clustered into four different sections. These addressed the children's response to Bible Explorer; textual issues around gender, violence and the omission of stories; practical considerations, including the local curriculum, inter-faith issues and school bookings; and the presenter's personal response to the programme.

The interview transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory approach, which finds categories in the data, based on the participants' own language. The data collection process will inevitably affect the data produced and is thus intrinsically linked to the final analysis. The questions I used and the language in which they were expressed have shaped the concepts which were drawn out of the transcripts. One result of this approach is that the precise categories which emerged from the school feedback forms are not replicated here, although the same broad themes occur in both data sets.

The differing backgrounds of the seven interviewees gave a distinctive flavour to each conversation: each raised specific concerns, based on their individual experience. The full-time schools worker was worried about the accountability of BX presenters, for example, and a church minister talked about the importance of compromise, patience and restraint when teaching Christianity in schools. There were two noticeable areas of complete agreement: all seven interviewees were adamant that a BXer should "never ever ask the kids to respond"[1] and all were "passionate about trying to keep really close to the text"[2] of the Bible story they were telling.

"Bible Explorer is just continuous joy"[3].

The story that emerges from the data is one of real pleasure – for the children and for the presenters. For most children, a BX lesson is a time of "interest and enthusiasm and joy"[4]. BXers enjoy their time in the classroom, too: "I just love doing it actually. I find it gives me energy and it's such fun."[5] The result is that lessons are something of a two-way street, with both parties taking delight in the other's enjoyment: "enthusiasm's catching, isn't it?"[6] Indeed, "intensive joyous learning"[7] seems to be the hallmark of Bible Explorer. Ellen, a retired primary school teacher, commented that "BX is pretty unique because of the level of entertainment that there is in with the teaching"[8]. Both elements are clearly important to presenters. Having fun is one of Naomi's ground rules for her sessions:

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[1] Martin, p.14
[2] Ellen, p.4
[3] Ellen, p.7.
[4] Ellen, p.2
[5] Angela, p.9
[6] Ellen, p.4
[7] Ellen, p.7
[8] Ellen, p.7

> I start with, 'I've got two rules: one is when I'm talking, you listen – which you all know and you do in school anyway, so that's not going to be a problem for you. And the second is I want you to enjoy yourself, so put on a smile and let's laugh!'[9]

Naomi's two rules reflect the importance of both facets of Bible Explorer. Ellen talked at some length about the difficulties of getting the right balance between entertaining and educating the children:

> I do pray often about it, just asking the Lord not to make me a one-man show and entertainer, not to allow that to happen in children's eyes and, if that is the case and if that is what I am, then it can be used for God's glory, because otherwise I'm missing the point. Sometimes I feel that the staff in the room might think that's what I am, and that does concern me and make me go back and pray that the Lord can turn that around[10].

Because Bible Explorer is a programme designed exclusively for use in schools, education is at the heart of what every BXer does. "What we're doing in literal terms is the history of Judaism and the teachers appreciate it at that level. The teachers are hugely impressed with the amount of history and geography that we cover."[11] For many BXers, however, this is not the whole story: they understand their educational role in much broader terms than the fulfilment of the RE curriculum, however important that may be. For some, this stems from an awareness of the significance of the Bible in Western culture. Yvette, for example, noted that "all our literature, all our art, all our music, all our law, everything, has got its basis in the Old Testament."[12] Angela develops this point further: "my contention is that you can't be well educated unless you do know something about the Bible, really. That's what Theodore Roosevelt said – it's worth more than a college education, a thorough knowledge of the Bible."[13] Yvette taught English Literature for many years. She is convinced that the best educational outcomes are produced when pupils feel a real connection to their subject:

> I am just as evangelical about Jane Austen and Shakespeare and poetry as I am about the Gospel, in the sense that I always wanted my kids to love English. I wanted them to love it because I passionately believe that if you love something, you do well. So educationally, I would want them to have a fantastic time in Bible Explorer because then they'll have their minds opened and, as it happens, I believe this is the truth.[14]

The feedback forms give a clear sense of how much children enjoy the course, and it was fascinating to hear from the interviewees about the "wonderful experiences that we have"

[9] Naomi, p.3
[10] Ellen, p.7
[11] Martin, p.1
[12] Yvette, p.5
[13] Angela, p.6
[14] Yvette, p.10

in the classroom. It seems that Ellen's description of Bible Explorer as "just continuous joy"[15] would be recognised by many BXers.

"We do something special."[16]

As Yvette's comment above suggests, for BXers there is something special about the material they are teaching, beyond its cultural significance. Interviewees described the Bible as "a story that never dies"[17] and a story that has "something powerful"[18] about it. For Angela, it is quite simply "the best story ever."[19] Martin described Bible Explorer as "the best tool I've found"[20] for sharing the Bible in schools. "I wish I could be paid to do it. If we could be paid to do it, I'd probably be doing it all week and I wouldn't do anything else."[21] Yvette, however, takes a different stance: "I love Bible Explorer but I'm glad that it's not all I do"[22]. This is because she finds the repetition a "struggle… I always want to be doing something different."[23]

The interviews suggest that BXers are committed primarily to sharing the message of the Bible and that the BX programme provides them with a first-rate vehicle for doing this. Several interviewees described how "I feel it's what I'm meant to be doing"[24], both because "I love doing it"[25] and because "it's something I can do"[26].

> I go to a Bible teaching church… and they take Jesus' final Commission very seriously. I find teaching quite difficult to adults and evangelism isn't the easiest thing for me, but through the medium of storytelling to an age group which I love and know quite well - very well, I hope – I felt, from the word go, that I could do something. I just prayed about it and the door was so open.[27]

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[15] Ellen, p.7
[16] Simon, p.11
[17] Ellen, p.15
[18] Angela, p.3
[19] Angela, p.8
[20] Martin, p.3
[21] Martin, p.12
[22] Yvette, p.5
[23] Yvette, p.3
[24] Angela, p.11
[25] Angela, p.11
[26] Angela, p.11
[27] Ellen, p.9

All the interviewees spoke of their sense of calling[28], their awareness of a special gift for storytelling[29] or working with children[30], and their passion "to teach the Bible"[31].

> That's why I went into my line of work, to teach the Bible. So, instead of sitting in an office, I enjoy actually getting hands-on and teaching children about God's word. I think what I love most about it, particularly when you teach a story that they don't know, is when you see their eyes light up, their engagement with the story, or when you see something suddenly drop into place for children and they realise how it all fits together: I-never-knew-that-before type moments, I love.[32]

Naomi talked about the difference that living with "an expectation that God is amazing"[33] can make to children's lives. Several interviewees shared her sense of the significance of Bible Explorer:

> I think it's an important work. I think Scripture commands us to hold out the Word of Life and that's what I want to do, and to young lives. So I feel tremendously privileged to be able to do it and I hope I can do it for many more years[34].

This desire to share the Bible is shaped, perhaps even constrained, by the educational setting: "You always, I think, feel there's more I'd love to teach these children about, but you have to pray that it's not the only opportunity you get, I suppose."[35] Yvette was quite forceful in stressing the parameters within which BXers work:

> I think it's very, very important for schools workers to get this right. I think it's vital that they get it right. We are there to educate, end of story. We are there to educate.[36]

As noted earlier, all the interviewees acknowledged this boundary: "you're teaching facts and you've got to be very careful that you don't overstep the line"[37]. For Simon, the rigidity of this boundary means that "schools ministry as a strategy on its own" is never particularly successful: "even the best lesson in the world, unless it's followed up or you build some link with the family, the school or the parents"[38] will be quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, if children are given "a good impression of Christianity that might last them through to their

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[28] Angela, p.11
[29] Ian, p.11
[30] Martin, 11
[31] Simon, p.10
[32] Simon, p.10
[33] Naomi, p.12
[34] Angela, p.12
[35] Simon, p.6
[36] Yvette, p.10
[37] Naomi, p.11
[38] Simon, p.4

adult life"[39], then something valuable has been achieved. In much the same way, Martin, too, saw the work of Bible Explorer as "laying a foundation"[40]. In adhering to this limitation, all the presenters were conscious of the level of trust placed in them by schools.

> Yes, there is a lot of trust in us, so that [schools] know that we are not going to proselytise, if you like. We're not going to start asking for an altar call or anything like that. They can trust us to go in and do the education side of it.[41]

Evangelism may be inappropriate in an educational setting, but BXers nevertheless expect "responses to the stories"[42], particularly in the form of questions[43]. Ellen saw this as the essence of Bible Explorer:

> I think our calling is to encourage the children to think about serious issues for themselves and to question things that maybe they've never questioned before.[44]

Naomi, too, loves the "children's reactions"[45] but sees her task as presenting an alternative worldview:

> I'm there to teach, but you're then giving children a choice because without that teaching, children have got no choice because they don't see that there is another way. They're brought up in a home where God is not observed, God is not real, God is not even talked about in most homes… I know 'ignorance is bliss', but it's not. So they need to know that God does care, and God is creative and God listens and He hears and He answers prayers. So, although you're teaching, you're saying that God is alive… I don't count that as evangelism, I count it as fact.[46]

Ian agrees with Naomi that Christian outreach must begin with education: "I think the boundary between evangelism and education is fairly fuzzy anyway."[47] Yvette and Angela, too, echoed the importance of education in promoting faith:

> I believe that if you get educated about who Jesus Christ really is and what he really did, inevitably you might want to do something about that because otherwise I wouldn't be a Christian myself. So, what I'm saying is, I don't think you need to push Christianity or indoctrinate anybody, if people know what real Christianity is… As soon as I found out about real Christianity, I was attracted to it straight away, but for the first 14 years of my life, I only knew about a very pathetic puny version, which I fear is what goes on quite a lot of the time

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[39] Simon, p.4
[40] Martin, p.6
[41] Ian, p.8
[42] Ellen, p.8
[43] See, for example, Yvette, p.7 and Angela, p.8.
[44] Ellen, p.7
[45] Naomi, p.1
[46] Naomi, p. 11
[47] Ian, p.8

because if people are teaching Christianity that don't know about it, then it will be coming across very badly, I suspect.[48]

Like Yvette, Angela sees a watered-down version of Christianity in many schools:

A main job for me is they come away knowing what the good news of Jesus is, because if they don't know that, they don't know the Gospel… They think that being a Christian means being a nice person, opening the doors and not running in the corridor and being polite to the teachers. And that is, for most people, what they think being a Christian is, it's being a nice person, so we're all Christians in this country.[49]

For BXers, then, their task is to transmit the story that lies at the heart of their own faith and practice, without preaching.

It's hard to know whether you are getting the whole story into their minds but you're certainly introducing characters and the idea of God. So, every little helps, doesn't it? You're starting, you're sowing some seed.[50]

The underlying hope is to encourage the children "to live the story and be in the story themselves."[51] The majority of interviewees stressed the importance of questions for achieving this – both the questions that the children themselves ask and the questions that the BXer poses.

Our role as storytellers is to tell the stories as best we can, and as God enables us to, but also to be looking for those searching questions. I am actually being critical about myself at the moment. I think we need to put time aside to think of the right questions to finish the story with: 'what sort of God is it that allowed that to happen?'[52]

Angela agrees with this approach:

I've got on my PowerPoint the question, 'who is this man?' Ask the question. For me, that is really important, that the children are asking that question, because [Jesus] is not just any old person, he's someone special. So I'm teasing it out of them, but I'm not putting them on the spot and saying, 'you need to believe this, otherwise this.' That's not my job.[53]

The major constraint in sessions is time: "there isn't room for a lot of questioning"[54]. Together with the prohibition on preaching, this forces BXers to leave the story to speak for itself:

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[48] Yvette, p.10
[49] Angela, p.7
[50] Angela, p.2
[51] Angela, p.2
[52] Ellen, p.14
[53] Angela, p.8
[54] Angela, p.2

> You've fulfilled the Gospel because you've explained what [Jesus] said he was doing, but you haven't preached because you're only teaching the words of Jesus. Don't put in your perception of what the Gospel is; we're not there to do that…[55]

Ian, however, could see a real benefit in this approach:

> Sometimes you don't need to give the application to the story. I think we're very good at analysing our stories and we have a tendency to over-analyse and sometimes it's good just to tell the story and leave it.[56]

With or without a teacher's input, the interviewees were quite confident that the truth of the story reaches the children: "we don't have to force it; it's so powerful, if it's said with love and good humour and with clarity, it will speak, it will get through."[57] In this way, the format of the programme authorizes BXers "to leave space for the Spirit to do his work. I tell the story, he opens eyes, if they're to be opened."[58]

The flexible delivery method allows presenters to bring their particular skills and interests into the classroom to enhance their storytelling. Each presenter thus becomes a unique medium for the story. This leads to a variety of emphases amongst presenters, with some BXers seeing themselves first and foremost as story-tellers, and others self-identifying as teachers or evangelists. Of the seven interviewees, three described themselves as teachers; two as story-tellers; and two as evangelists.

> I think in my heart that I am an evangelist. This is the Good News, this is the story and it starts way back, 4,000 years ago – well, before that. So that's why I do it and I think children need to hear this story and they're the best soil because when they get older, they just sort of harden up and they've been baked by the culture and if the seed hasn't gone in… [59]

In Martin's case, he brings his talent for "magic and stand-up"[60] into the classroom. He was happy to admit that teaching a BX session is "as much mental energy and physical effort as when I'm doing a show."[61] This suggests a real depth of commitment and several interviewees echoed Martin's determination to give of their very best in the classroom. What precise form this might take varies from presenter to presenter. Angela, for example, learns the names of all the children in her class: "For me, someone's name is very important to them and if you remember it, it shows you care for them. I think that's the personal touch I

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[55] Martin, p.14
[56] Ian, p.12
[57] Martin, p.14
[58] Angela, p.8
[59] Angela, p.9
[60] Martin, p.10
[61] Martin, p.11

want to give Bible Explorer – God is calling them by name."[62] For Ellen, excellence lies in "searching for those open-ended questions and connecting them to the story"[63]:

> If I don't have the preparation beforehand, I do often find that I'm talking *at* - rather than inviting those questions, and asking for observations and feelings from the children, and drawing out the empathy. So, yes, if you're in a hurry or you're not prepared, it's quite easy to just go in and do it, present it and then get out, rather than be doing what I think God wants us to be doing, which is eliciting responses...[64]

Yvette, too, sees painstaking preparation as part of the success of Bible Explorer: "you've spent hours and hours, far more hours than an ordinary class teacher could ever spend on getting their RE lesson together"[65].

Textual Issues: ""I am a purist"[66].

The BXers' high regard for the Bible means that they are uncomfortable moving too far away from the text: "you can't go outside of truth."[67]

> I'm a bit passionate about trying to keep really close to the text and if I don't, it's because I haven't reread it and reminded myself of the finer details... I love that it keeps me reading my Bible as well.[68]

Martin noted that, as he never reads aloud from the Bible, he is "not literally using the text"[69]. Although one interviewee rejected "a modern take"[70] on the stories altogether, most are happy to "add today's words"[71], particularly for the purpose of clarity. All would inform the children if they had embellished a story in any way: "I'm quite strict about not adding details in that aren't in the text"[72].

> I think probably everything that's there is there for a good reason. Having said that, there's so much that isn't there and so what I'll often say to the children is, 'do you know, the Bible doesn't tell us why he said that, it doesn't say why. This happened and then this happened

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[62] Angela, p.10
[63] Ellen, p.14
[64] Ellen, p.8
[65] Yvette, p.4
[66] Angela, p.5
[67] Naomi, p.10
[68] Ellen, p.4
[69] Martin, p.5
[70] Angela, p.5
[71] Naomi, p.10
[72] Simon, p. 6

and we have no idea why. What do you think? Why did that happen?' And we talk about it…[73]

All the interviewees were asked whether they had experienced difficulties in the classroom with the biblical portrayal of violence or women. No issues around gender were reported:

> The gender one I don't find so difficult to deal with because, in one sense, it's not that long since we've had the vote, is it? So we're talking 4,000 years ago. So I just get over that one with, 'sorry, girls, this is how it was'.[74]

Simon agreed: "the Bible is the Bible; we can't do much about that"[75]. Both he and Ian stressed that they "try and make sure that the girls are involved as well in the story-telling itself"[76]. The violence, however, was something that all the interviewees had considered carefully. Ellen noted:

> I was very sensitive to that when I started but I seem to have found ways round it. I have one bit where I say, 'I'm afraid the next story is gory, so if you don't like gory, can you just pop your fingers in your ears until I wave at you.' Little techniques like that seem to override these things.[77]

Martin addresses the problem very differently:

> I'm very open about the violence. Obviously I don't endorse it but I don't hide it either. I'm well aware that the boys will keep listening if there's battles and fights involved. And it does, it appeals as much to the boys, Bible Explorer, as it does to the girls.[78]

Ian takes a similar approach: "I don't have a problem with telling the gory stories, but I might not go into as much detail."[79] Simon noted that issues such as marital infidelity can be "trickier"[80] to handle with a class than the savagery of some stories. In contrast, Yvette finds the violence "a real struggle, which is terribly difficult without Jesus"[81]. She sees the lack of time within the BX programme for addressing the children's questions as a real drawback. Naomi, too, has concerns, but these focus on the understanding of God that the children may take away from the stories in the Old Testament: "It worries me sometimes that it looks like God is a God that destroys; that's what I feel sensitive about."[82] In contrast, "children

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[73] Yvette, p. 9
[74] Yvette, p.6
[75] Simon, p.5
[76] Ian, p.5
[77] Ellen, p.3
[78] Martin, p.4
[79] Ian, p.5
[80] Simon, p6
[81] Yvette, p.6
[82] Naomi, p.9

like the crucifixion… I think because Easter does get talked about in school, and Christmas, so they know about it; [in Bible Explorer] it's just put in a way that touches them in their spirit."[83] For Naomi, the key to handing difficult issues with the children is "sensitivity"[84]. Angela talked about the "very inflammatory"[85] nature of many Old Testament stories: "we didn't write it, we just tell the story. But you can't sanitize it… We are living in spiritual warfare and this was really happening."[86]

Textual Issues: "It isn't needed for the story…"[87]

Conversations about the violence in the text flowed naturally into a consideration of which stories were omitted and why. All interviewees acknowledged that there were more stories to tell than time available: "time is the real tension."[88] Everyone trimmed the material to fit their sessions, but how this was done depended on various factors. Several interviewees commented that a particular incident – such as the Binding of Isaac – "isn't needed for the story"[89]. BXers have a strong sense of the over-arching narrative of the two Testaments - "how the big picture works"[90] - and understand Bible Explorer as telling "the salvation story"[91]. The hand signs and key words are recognised as the bones of this story, which supply the structure and shape of each session. Within this framework, however, individual presenters are free to "sort out"[92] for themselves what they wish to include. Ellen, however, would like to see a reduction in the amount of material covered in the key words:

> I don't know that 'Haran' is all that helpful to the story and even 'Terah'. There are quite a few little places where I would probably redesign it myself… For me, certainly the biggest constraint in teaching and presenting Bible Explorer is time, and so every little bit that could be cut out, because it hasn't really got a clear rationale for being in there, I think could happily be taken out. There's so much in Bible Explorer.[93]

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[83] Naomi, p.9
[84] Naomi, p.9
[85] Angela, p.4
[86] Angela, p.3
[87] Ian, p.5
[88] Ellen, p.8
[89] Ian, p.5
[90] Simon, p.6
[91] Yvette, p.9
[92] Yvette, p.9
[93] Ellen, p.4

For Naomi, there were some subjects that "you don't want to touch"[94], especially "with that age of children"[95]. We discussed the love story between Isaac and Rebekah, which I teach but Naomi does not. She was also concerned that "you don't want to confuse issues"[96] and gave the example of David and Bathsheba, an episode which shows the 'good' king in a bad light:

> I do wonder sometimes whether it's worth doing, so that they see how bad David could be, even David. But his heart was right - and how much God did forgive! I keep wondering about that one…[97]

Martin, in contrast, tells this story: "I say there are things we shouldn't be looking at and David was caught looking - it's very relevant to children and it's very relevant to people today."[98] For Martin, part of the power of the biblical stories is that they challenge contemporary cultural norms.[99] He gives the book of Esther as an example:

> They love the story of Esther. All the boys want to be Haman because he's the bad guy. And I'm trying to show them it's not cool to be the bad guy, actually; it's cool to be the good guy. So, yes, we're going against culture there.[100]

Angela was anxious that some stories "might disturb"[101] her pupils:

> I don't mention the circumcision of Isaac. We don't get into circumcision, although that is a very big part of the initiation, the covenant given to Abraham. We don't mention it because I think these children, although they're quite mature, they're not that mature and they can't cope with that and the idea that Abraham would be forced to sacrifice his son… We haven't got time to delve into all the questions that that's going to throw up.[102]

Three presenters felt the surfeit of stories was a useful tool for encouraging children to read the Bible for themselves. Ian, for example, skips some of the gorier stories in this way:

> I point to Lot and I say, 'basically some not very nice things happen to Lot but I'm not going to tell you what they are because they're so bad. If you really want to find out, you'll have to get hold of a Bible and read it for yourself'.[103]

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[94] Naomi, p.10
[95] Naomi, p.9
[96] Naomi, p.10
[97] Naomi, p.10
[98] Martin, p.4
[99] Martin, p.4
[100] Martin, p.4
[101] Angela, p.4
[102] Angela, p.4
[103] Ian, p.5. See also Yvette, p.7 and Martin, p.5.

Yvette takes her classes into their school library to find out what Bibles and/or Bible stories are available there; she also brings in a selection of her own Bibles in order to show the children a number of different translations. She stressed that "the idea isn't that they come away from Bible Explorer thinking the Bible's a good book. You want them to go away and read it."[104]

Yvette also noted that the excess of material gives BXers a wide range of stories to choose from so that they are not stuck "doing the same things over and over again"[105]. This not only prevents her from becoming "bored"[106] but also allows her to "mix and match"[107] the stories to produce a varied session:

> I think it's quite important that you've got some stories where you're just getting them gripped by the actual story; other stories where you might sing it or something; another story where they're at the front acting it and another story where you just think it's silly. So, for example, in Session One, every single time I've done it, I've done the Tower of Babel and I quite often think, 'why on earth do I do that?' Because really the Tower of Babel is a tiny thing and a difficult thing really. Why on earth do I do it? But the thing is they just think it's hilarious this version that I've got and it kind of wins them over… It's very early on, obviously, and it's just so stupid and daft the way that I do it, and I wonder whether to keep it in each time.[108]

In contrast, Simon more or less replicates in his sessions how he saw Bible Explorer modelled to him during his training: "I stick pretty closely to what [the trainer] did in terms of story selection"[109]. This echoes the survey finding that most BXers do not change their sessions very much once they start teaching the programme.

Practical considerations: the course content

For five of the interviewees, Bible Explorer is just one of a range of Christian activities that they deliver in schools. This gives them a rather different perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, compared with volunteers such as myself, who only teach BX. All five write their own material, as well as using ready-made resources. For them, this has two advantages. Firstly, it saves time: "it takes longer to start exploring and knowing how

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[104] Yvette, p.7.
[105] Yvette, p.7
[106] Yvette, p.7
[107] Yvette, p.8
[108] Yvette, p.8
[109] Simon, p.6

to use a resource than it does just writing it yourself."[110] Secondly, it allows a course to be "tailor-made" to local requirements. Nevertheless, all five relish the storytelling format of Bible Explorer and see it as "perfect for that age of child".[111]

> Out of all the lessons that we do, BX is my favourite series of lessons. There are loads and loads of stories to them and it is high energy all the way through... In fact, thinking about it, we have probably been inspired, influenced by BX, when we put [our own material] together.[112]

However, concerns were raised about the course, most of which related to its content. Simon noted that BX "is quite a small part of what we do, not so much because we don't value it but because we've found there hasn't been the take up so much"[113]. In his experience, schools are understandably reluctant to book a programme that falls outside their local RE syllabus, particularly if courses tailor-made to the curriculum are available instead. Indeed, Naomi mentioned two schools which had recently stopped booking BX because "it didn't fit in their curriculum"[114]. This had also been a major concern for Yvette, until her local SACRE added Bible Explorer to the county's RE syllabus:

> One of the things that I feel quite passionately about is that, if we're going to do this, because we're Christians, we're going to do it fantastically well and therefore, it's got to be educationally totally top-notch. Well, if it's not in the syllabus and we're claiming it's RE, then that's not right, is it? So I was a little bit worried about that...[115]

Ian faced a similar dilemma when his local SACRE changed the syllabus. Under the new arrangements, the Bible was no longer covered in Years 5 and 6, but, instead, was allocated to Year 4. Ian approached the Bible Explorer management and was given permission to offer the programme to the younger year group. He acknowledged that this was not ideal and the children "certainly struggle with the worksheets"[116].

Even where BX fits local curriculum requirements, some interviewees were concerned that it fell short of fulfilling the national requirement to 'learn from' religious texts as well as 'learn about' them. Some saw this as a by-product of the fast pace of the sessions, in that

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[110] Simon, p.10
[111] Yvette, p.9
[112] Ian, p.11
[113] Simon, p.4
[114] Naomi, p.10
[115] Yvette, p.4
[116] Ian, p.2

presenters only have time for "snapshot little comments rather than an in-depth study"[117].
Ian, however, saw the problem in a different light:

> I think the rationale behind [Bible Explorer] is that they want to try and get the story of the
> Bible – and the fact that the Bible is not boring – to as many children as possible. Now, in
> order to do that, you have got to train as many people as possible to go into schools. So you
> cannot be certain of the sensitivities or the abilities of the people that you are training, or
> the relationship they have with schools, whether they are able to go in and deliver 'learning
> from' in such a way that it is not going to be detrimental to their policy… Of course, as soon
> as you've got someone who is able and has the relationship with the schools, then it's a bit
> limited.[118]

Ian thus sees 'learning from' as dependent on both the ability of the presenter and the
relationship that the presenter has with the host school. Yvette, who trained to teach RE and
English after studying for a degree in theology, echoes Ian's frustration with the limitations
of BX. She misses the 'learning from' element not only because "it's exactly what is in the
syllabus"[119], but also because she enjoys it so much:

> I love teaching RE in schools because of the 'learning from', which, by the way, is the thing
> that the teachers find harder by miles, especially if they're not believers of any sort. I mean,
> if they were Muslim or Sikh or something, at least they would have some concept of what
> belief does to you and how it affects your life… Most teachers are not going to be committed
> to any religion and so to 'learn from' is quite a big ask by the time you get to Year 5. I think in
> Years 1 and 2, you're talking about some fairly basic morality issues, but if you're talking
> about spirituality, that's hard; that's really hard. Anyway, the problem with Bible Explorer is
> that you haven't got time to do what you've got time to do in an RE lesson… BX has masses
> of information but very little time to actually consolidate it.[120]

Ian also commented that the New Testament programme is harder to deliver than the Old,
partly because it is difficult to avoid preaching:

> The Old Testament is great chronologically. There is very clear progression all the way
> through. You know where you're coming from, you know where you're going to, and I think
> they're great stories for the boys. Once you get into the New Testament, because of the four
> Gospels, particularly the Synoptics and John, trying to combine them, you lose an element of
> chronology and it becomes a lot harder to avoid the 'learning from' without being too
> explicit.[121]

Ellen acknowledged that BX might not be exactly "what the curriculum demands"[122] but
refused to see that as a valid reason for a school not to take the programme. For Simon,

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[117] Ian, p.4
[118] Ian, p.9-10
[119] Yvette, p.5
[120] Yvette, p.5
[121] Ian, p.10
[122] Ellen, p.13

living in an area with a number of "very high-flying outstanding schools"[123], the issue with the curriculum is rather different: teachers see BX "as a bit lightweight, because it's just storytelling the whole time."[124] He also noted how busy the final year of primary school can be for pupils and how full school timetables are in general. "RE often gets squeezed out of the syllabus. It's a challenge of our times."[125]

Practical considerations: the relationship with schools

Ian was not the only interviewee to raise the importance of a long-term relationship with a school. Presenters saw this as important for a number of reasons. For Simon, who is a full-time Children and Families Minister, "it isn't enough just to teach"[126] in a school, although this is "valuable and it's Kingdom work"[127]. Instead, the aim is to build a relationship of "strong trust"[128] with the school community, out of which other opportunities may grow. He sees "patience"[129] as the key to schools ministry.

> I love working with children because of their passion for life, their general enthusiasm… If you get the children's work right, that'll flow into your youth work, which will flow into your adult ministry. So I think churches need to be investing more and more in children… That's my mission in life: to try and get churches more investing in children and in children's ministry, seeing it as strategic and important.[130]

Bible Explorer is limited, from Simon's perspective, because "you can only do that once a year with a group; once they've done it, they've done it."[131] He also stressed that "we've agreed in the contract with [Bible Explorer] that we won't go in with a view to then plugging other church activities."[132] Martin, in contrast, sees BX as a way to "open doors"[133] and is happy to offer follow-up activities, such as a themed assembly.

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[123] Simon, p5
[124] Simon, p.5
[125] Simon, p.8
[126] Simon, p,3
[127] Simon, p.4
[128] Simon, p. 4
[129] Simon, p.7
[130] Simon, p.10
[131] Simon, p.1
[132] Simon, p.3
[133] Martin, p.9

Yvette, too, sees a strong relationship with schools as being of central importance. For her, however, it is less about "planting seeds long-term in children's lives"[134] than ensuring the survival of a Christian input into schools:

> With this sort of work, it's really vital that we look long term all the time… because at some point, the Government are going to change the rules. I don't know how much you know about the Government guidelines about RE but it's so out of date, which is great for us. But 50% plus Christianity in RE? This isn't a Christian country anymore and yet the law says that they've got to do 50% Christianity… At some point, that's going to change. Really good practice will then still stand because that will be about relationships in schools and schools knowing here's somebody that we can rely on to help us and to do something really well. Whereas if Bible Explorer is a little bit on the dodgy side, then that'll be the first thing to chop.[135]

One of Yvette's greatest anxieties about the programme is that "if you get a loose cannon out there, Bible Explorer could be closed down."[136] She sees this as a real possibility because "anybody could be trained as a BX presenter and is hardly monitored at all and could be doing anything."[137] In particular, she has in mind "people going in [to schools] and telling the children you've got to become a Christian"[138]. Ian shares her concern, to some extent: "there are lots of individual Bible Explorers rather than Bible Explorers who are working for an organisation. That's where it becomes tricky to monitor what they're doing."[139] Both Yvette and Ian felt that Bible Explorer had grown too fast: "it's kind of exploded in popularity"[140].

A further shortcoming of the programme, for Yvette, is that no further RE support is offered to schools after the course has finished. Even allowing for repeat bookings, the programme fails to build on the children's newly found enthusiasm for RE, which is a common outcome of the programme[141].

> If everything just goes back to what it was before the Bible Explorer visit, then you could argue that the value of it is limited. Most schools, of course, when they've had it once, they want it every year because it's so good.[142]

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[134] Simon, p.4
[135] Yvette, p.13
[136] Yvette, p.12
[137] Yvette, p.11
[138] Yvette, p.11
[139] Ian, p.10
[140] Yvette, p.12
[141] Yvette, p.3
[142] Yvette, p.4

Practical considerations: training, administration and support

Simon, the youngest of the interviewees, mentioned how difficult it is to find volunteers who are available during the day. He noted that this was a particular problem for Bible Explorer, which expects a great deal of its work force:

> 'Come and do this training, do all this volunteering for us, but you've got to pay for it' – it's a hard sell. I didn't sign up for it until I was being paid by a church who would then pay for me to go and do the training. So the hard sell was me selling it to the vicar and the Church Council and saying, 'this is worth investing in, because if you train me up to do this, I'll be able to take it into schools and it'll be another string to our bow of things that we can offer'. But for an individual, particularly younger individuals, it's a hard sell…[143]

Two BXers also raised the difficulty of learning all the material: "if I'd known how hard it was, I probably wouldn't have done it, because there's so much memorising to do."[144] Training remains a controversial issue amongst presenters. Some feel that there is too little ongoing training for BXers[145]; others feel that the current training requirements are inappropriate for professional schools' workers[146]. Some believe the system is about right[147] and look back on their training with real pleasure, as "a good experience"[148].

Ellen is worried about the survival of BX: "my anxiety at the moment is that the presenters seem to be getting more ancient and where are the young ones? Where are they coming from?"[149] Simon felt that the BX office could do more to promote the programme, and gave an example of what he meant: "being at Bible College, if somebody sent me a pack of stuff and said, 'give it out', I could interest another 200 keen, potential future ministers with it"[150]. He was frustrated that there is no central support, either for booking schools or for networking: with Bible Explorer, "you feel very isolated"[151]. In terms of his own Church ministry, "the key building block that made the whole thing work was having somebody that had got the time to keep the bookings coming in."[152] In Ellen's area, there is a coordinator to handle BX bookings: "the school wants to see that you represent an organisation that is well

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[143] Simon, p.9
[144] Martin, p.3
[145] Yvette, p.13
[146] Ian, p.3
[147] Martin, p.13
[148] Simon, p.9
[149] Ellen, p.6
[150] Simon, p.8
[151] Simon, p.8
[152] Simon, p.3

organised and well structured, so logically we should have a coordinator."[153] However, this can bring problems of its own:

> I just have the feeling that sometimes it is, or could be, that the person who approaches the school is not the right personality… and so I'm not sure that all the reasons that are given [for not wanting BX] are genuine reasons. We have so many varied ones… Sometimes I feel that a different approach – sometimes it's to a teacher, sometimes it's the Head that makes the decision, sometimes it's the Year 5/6 leader or the Key Stage 2 Coordinator. You never quite know who it is, but it's about catching the right person at the right time and with the right sales pitch.[154]

Martin, in contrast, saw arranging school bookings as part of the presenter's job. In fact, finding a school in which to teach Bible Explorer is the final hurdle he sets for his BX trainees: "your next step now is to book a school off your own back"[155].

There was a strong feeling amongst the interviewees that the main obstacle in arranging school bookings was a lack of familiarity with the programme[156]. Simon spoke of the importance of raising awareness with teachers: "so often they're wary of giving something a go before they've seen it or experienced it or had it personally recommended to them from another teacher."[157] Yvette, too, stressed this point:

> This sounds really arrogant about BX but I would say that any school that doesn't want BX, it's only because they don't realise how good it is. If people have seen BX, I cannot think of a single reason why you would ever want to say no.[158]

There is anecdotal evidence of presenters offering their local schools a brief taster session of the programme, with great success: one such BXer "said he's never been turned down by a school yet."[159]

For Ellen, too, being a BX presenter is a lonely business, but it was not administrative support that she missed.

> I do think we need people to be backing us up in prayer as we come out of lessons and to remember individuals and how they reacted… It's such a unique experience being in that classroom, but isolating actually. Having that immense privilege makes it harder for other people to identify with you.[160]

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[153] Ellen, p.5
[154] Ellen, p.5
[155] Martin, p.13
[156] See, for example, Martin, p.6: "If they'd have given me a shot, they'd have loved it."
[157] Simon, p.5
[158] Yvette, p.10
[159] Ellen, p,5
[160] Ellen, p.14

Those BXers who work as part of a team thoroughly appreciated the support and encouragement they receive from co-workers: "you're all in it together"[161].

> I think I'm very fortunate that I've got this support. I've got prayer support, too. I'm featured on the prayer letter that goes out every week when I'm doing the lessons, and I get support with props and all sorts of things.[162]

Practical considerations: the worksheets

Some interviewees actively use the worksheets that accompany the programme with their pupils; others offer them to the school to use as they wish. Two described how they offer prizes to children who complete their BX booklet to a certain standard.

> It's part of the course: if they don't complete the worksheets they don't get the certificate… If they do less than eight pages, they don't pass, but if they do more than eight pages, they'll get a certificate. I give a grade for style and a grade for content… Occasionally, you'll get a child who'll get a good grade for both and they win a prize from me. The prize will usually be a Bible, but I make it clear to the teachers and the kids - these prizes are from me, not Bible Explorer.[163]

This can be a very successful strategy, with 80% of pupils participating in one school[164]. In total, three interviewees make Bibles available to the children, either as prizes for outstanding work (as above), or as gifts, or at cost price.

Ellen described how "the kids are really proud of their booklets"[165]. She also uses the "wonderful quiz" which completes both sets of worksheets to round off her Old and New Testament sessions. Ian has edited the worksheets to a bare minimum, and requires schools to photocopy only what he will use in his classes:

> My ideal length of time [for a session] would be between an hour and ten and an hour and fifteen minutes. When you end up with 55 minutes, it is a rush to get everything in and for me, the first thing that goes is the worksheets. I would rather tell them the stories and get them to do the hand actions, which are interactive, than get them to do the worksheets.[166]

In contrast, Ellen sees value in "allowing a bit more time just to have reflective questions which the children can answer"[167]:

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161 Simon, p.8
162 Angela, p.6
163 Martin, p.8
164 Simon, p.12
165 Ellen, p.3
166 Ian, p.1
167 Ellen, p.8

> I think some of the children would benefit from having time in the lesson, maybe halfway through or at certain points in the lesson, to have a five minute break from all the input and actually just to do an exercise for five or ten minutes in their workbooks. It's just that that means you've got to cut out some of the stories.[168]

Interestingly, some of the critical comments on the feedback forms addressed exactly this point, requesting that pupils complete some written work during sessions. Angela, too, felt that the worksheets were particularly helpful in giving the children time to consolidate their learning and to "work out who's who"[169]. They also have a role in providing children with a souvenir to take home:

> It's a shame people aren't making more use of [the worksheets] because if you've not got anything to keep as a memento of [Bible Explorer], I think it's easy to then forget what you've learnt.[170]

Practical considerations: faith and inter-faith issues

It is stressed during the training for Bible Explorer that presenters should "never criticise any denominations or other religions"[171]. All the interviewees were careful about the language they use in the classroom and acknowledged "the fear of saying something to offend"[172].

> It's the Schools' Worker's rulebook, I suppose, of remembering to say things like 'Christians believe that…' or 'the Bible says that…' rather than declaring it as unnegotiable truth. It's one small compromise that we all have to make when doing Schools Ministry. But as you build up trust, you get more freedom… if we don't play ball with them, then they won't invite us back.[173]

Naomi expressed the problem very succinctly: "If other faiths started to think, 'well, we could do that', how would we feel?"[174] There was only one report of children being removed from a Bible Explorer class on religious grounds. This was the result of a previous incident in the school and did not reflect on the course itself. Several interviewees said how much they

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[168] Ellen, p.8
[169] Angela, p.2
[170] Simon, p.13
[171] Walk through the Bible Ministries, *Bible Explorer Old Testament Regional Trainee Manual* (rev. ed.; Beaumont, Essex: Walk through the Bible Ministries, 2009), 49.
[172] Ian, p.12
[173] Simon, p.7
[174] Naomi, p.10

enjoyed classes with diverse religious backgrounds: "children from other faiths are quite open often to hearing about other faiths."[175]

> Some of the most enthusiastic and interested children come from Jehovah's Witness backgrounds or Muslim backgrounds. They love seeing the identification in the beginning of the Old Testament with their faiths and I love dwelling on those points as well with the whole group. I try to gain their confidence that I'm not coming in to convert them, but just to tell them what Christians believe and uphold the Bible.[176]

Martin noted how often the prize winners for the best worksheets came from a Muslim background: this makes him "really pleased."[177] He also expressed concern that he may come across as anti-Semitic in his classes because "the Jews get told off so many times"[178] in the Bible. However, "nobody's ever commented on it and I do check myself."[179]

Several presenters reported that the biblical stories are largely unfamiliar to their pupils: "we can't assume that children know these stories. I think a lot of them don't know any."[180] Popular culture has a significant impact on the children's awareness of Bible characters, with the result that Joseph and Moses are perhaps the best known Old Testament figures. As one interviewee joked, "Thank Andrew Lloyd Webber for what's he doing; I can't wait for Daniel the musical!"[181]

> Compared with inner city schools, I think we've probably still got quite a large amount of Christianity going on here [in the South East]. But I'd still say, in the average Bible Explorer class of 30, only about 3, 4 or 5 would actually know the stories. Of course, the ones that do know the stories, they delight to be able to tell you, 'oh, I know this one!' What they often don't know is what it all means and how it all fits together. They don't know that sort of stuff, even in the church schools.[182]

With this in mind, Simon described how he would set up a session in a Church of England school:

> I say, 'these stories you probably know, but do you know which order they come in?' And we do the 'Who came first?' quiz and then compare how much they know at the end. For them, the getting it in context and seeing the geography of how it's all laid out, that's all new for

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[175] Ian, p.7
[176] Ellen, p.6
[177] Martin, p.7
[178] Martin, p.5
[179] Martin, p.5
[180] Angela, p.2
[181] Martin, p.5
[182] Yvette, p.6

them – and seeing how the big picture works. We talk about the different pieces of the puzzle and putting it all into perspective. That works quite well.[183]

Like some of his pupils, Simon finds the framework of Bible Explorer to be "the most valuable thing I've taken away from the training"[184]. "Even for somebody who is familiar with the stories, it's given me that structure to hang it all on that I didn't have before and it's been an aide memoire"[185]. Martin, too, sees real personal benefit in teaching the programme. "My grip on the history has become greater as I've gone over and over it… I try to get [the children] to feel what I feel, which is that we're part of that history."[186]

Yvette was keen to stress that "Bible Explorer is what gets the kids really positive about RE teaching generally"[187]. The children "respond incredibly well to BX. I think that's why BX works so well"[188].

> RE gets such a bad press in schools, and I think one of the main beauties of BX is that it makes kids love RE and that has to be a good thing. Even if the next thing you're going to do is Hinduism, that has to be a good thing, doesn't it, for schools?[189]

Naomi showed me some letters that children had written to her after a Bible Explorer course. One child wrote, "It has taught me not to judge someone on their faith. Just because they are a different religion, it doesn't mean you have to be mean to them."[190]

Three interviewees noted the impact that a class teacher can have on the children's response to the programme:

> Where there's a Christian teacher or Head in charge of the class or the school, there is great joy and satisfaction that the children are getting something worthwhile, and redressing the balance which I think is scarily lacking, as teachers seem to find it easier to teach other religions… I would say this, with all the experience that I have, that where the teacher gets involved and does the hand signs, the children are more enthusiastic and get more out of it than if the teacher turns their back and sits on the computer at the back of the class. It's always a sadness to me when that happens, but it does happen quite a lot and you just have to thank God that you're in the school at all.[191]

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[183] Simon, p.6
[184] Simon, p.7
[185] Simon, p.7
[186] Martin, p.12
[187] Yvette, p.2
[188] Yvette, p.4
[189] Yvette, p.10
[190] Naomi, p.13
[191] Ellen, p.12

Sadly, Ellen felt that some schools saw the only benefit of Bible Explorer as providing their teachers with "marking time – I can't see anything more worthy than that"[192]. This is a salutary reminder that the joy and passion felt by BXers for the programme is not universally shared.

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[192] Ellen, p.12

Chapter 5

Introduction

In assessing the value of the Bible Explorer programme, it is important to remember that success in education can be understood in different ways. What a pupil considers first rate in the classroom, for example, may not satisfy the policy maker who has certain social aims in mind, such as community cohesion. A balanced evaluation will consider a range of criteria[1]: at the very least, these will include the aims and outcomes of the programme; its content and delivery method; and how these relate to the broader aims of religious education and of education in general. In addition, taking a wider perspective, it is also worth considering whether BX has anything of value to contribute to the Christian community as a whole.

The educational implications of Bible Explorer

It is clear that Bible Explorer is highly regarded by the teachers and children who experience the programme. It has not only survived for 30 years but has grown steadily, reaching more than half a million pupils in that time. Nor does it operate solely in a Christian ghetto, but serves both faith and community schools. Indeed, the majority of schools (61%) which take the programme have no faith affiliation. The school feedback forms revealed that 89.5% of responses were positive or positive and effusive in their assessment of BX. Particularly interesting was the finding that some of the qualities of the course praised by schools, such as its content, the delivery method and the worksheets, were available in all classroom sessions, regardless of their overall assessment score. The reason for this uniform standard may well be that all these aspects relate directly to the programme itself, rather than to the abilities of the individual presenter. Much of Bible Explorer's success derives from the material it presents and the method by which this is delivered in the classroom.

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[1] L. Philip Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity: Developing a New Model of Religious Education* (London: Routledge, 2014)*,* 12-13.

1) **The content of Bible Explorer**

The BX programme is unique in teaching the "big picture"[2] of the Bible. Both Testaments are covered, although the Old Testament programme is more widely taught and more effusively praised by schools than is the New. The main focus of each session is storytelling, with 98% of survey respondents telling stories in all or most of their classes. There are real strengths to this approach. Firstly, it offers pupils a coherent introduction to the Christian story. It is widely recognised that focussing on individual Bible stories in a church setting can be problematic because it results in a disjointed understanding and can be misleading[3]. The impact on pupils of a holistic format rather than a more fractured approach to Scripture is not so well researched[4], although there is evidence to show that a systematic study of religion tends to produce a more positive view of religion in young people[5]. "The proper understanding and use of sacred texts[6]" has been identified as a particular issue, however, within RE. Julian Stern argues that "a proper consideration of biblical texts is vital[7]", and warns that "the relevant cultural and historical contexts must be supplied"[8]. BX does this well, using maps and timelines to help the children understand the framing of the stories they hear. Stern also suggests that, as the oral tradition is so important within many religions, RE should be leading the way in developing storytelling skills in schools[9]. BX clearly contributes to this. RE has also been criticised for failing to set sufficiently challenging tasks for pupils[10]. In Bible Explorer, the children are required to memorise an action and key word for each segment of the narrative that they hear; this enables pupils to list all the stories in their correct biblical order. The Old Testament programme contains 77 such hand signs and pupils are proud of their achievement in learning them: "the children cannot believe how much they have learnt in 5 weeks"[11]. Learning by rote and using specific bodily postures to accompany particular words are practices, like story-telling, which reflect the flavour of many religions.

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[2] http://www.bible.org.uk/child_events_what.php Accessed on 19/03/2015.
[3] Rosemary Cox, *Using the Bible with Children* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2000), 8.
[4] Julian Stern, *Teaching Religious Education* (London: Continuum, 2006), 18.
[5] Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity,* 17.
[6] Stern, *Teaching RE,* 104.
[7] Stern, *Teaching RE*, 10.
[8] Stern, *Teaching RE,* 10.
[9] Stern, T*eaching RE,* 19.
[10] Ofsted, *Transforming Religious Education: Religious Education in Schools 2006-2009* (Manchester: Ofsted, 2010), 20.
[11] Photo #145

It is perhaps unsurprising that the research into Bible Explorer reflects the central conclusions of the Biblos project[12], one of the largest RE research programmes in recent years[13]. Biblos suggested that pupils will respond well to biblical narratives, when the theological and cultural significance of the texts are communicated in an accessible way. Unlike BX, Biblos links the biblical narratives to particular themes in order to provide "bridges" between the stories and the children's experience[14]. BX would suggest that this is unnecessary. In rejecting a themed approach, Bible Explorer allows pupils to grasp the unity of the Old and New Testaments, sets Jesus firmly in his Jewish context, and highlights the relevance of the Bible for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Biblos also notes the importance of the RE teacher as "gatekeeper to and cartographer of[15]" the Bible. Bible Explorer has embraced this understanding of the presenter's role and both the title of the programme and layout of the worksheets reflects this.

A further strength of the programme's content is that the children are not offered "a bland diet of 'niceness'"[16] but instead exposed to "something which stands over against our own culture(s)"[17]. Julian Stern advises teachers that "RE must be a gritty subject"[18]; Bible Explorer goes some way to achieving this goal in the stories it shares. Even so, the extent to which BX addresses "the dark side of religion"[19] is open to debate. Presenters could be seen "to skirt around the embarrassment of history"[20], for example. A case in point would be the rather flippant handling of gender discrimination within the text: "sorry, girls, this is how it was…"[21]. We also heard how presenters regularly edit Old Testament stories. Rowan Williams reminds us, however, that "it's no use pretending that there is a reading of the Bible that is free of selection and interpretation"[22]. Editing that is driven by the age of the children seems entirely reasonable, although considerations of timing in a school setting may be less acceptable theologically. In addition, by avoiding all discussion of doctrinal issues, Bible Explorer runs

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[12] T. Copley et al., *Teaching Biblical Narrative: a Summary of the Main Findings of the Biblos Project, 1996-2004* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2004).

[13] Stern, *Teaching RE,* 9.

[14] Catherine Bowness et al., *Biblos Primary Teacher's Handbook* (Exeter: Brightsea Press, 2005), 5.

[15] Stern, *Teaching RE,* 12.

[16] Stern, *Teaching RE,* 101.

[17] Richard Briggs, *Why Read the Old Testament?* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2011), 12.

[18] Stern, *Teaching RE*, 101.

[19] Brenda Watson, "Why Religious education matters," in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 19.

[20] Roger Homan, "Constructing Religion," in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 185.

[21] Yvette, p.6.

[22] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), xiii.

the risk of obscuring the diversity that exists within Christianity. The programme's approach to the Bible reflects the Evangelical affiliation of its parent charity. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that there were no Roman Catholic presenters amongst either the survey respondents or interviewees, although a small number of feedback forms were returned by Catholic schools.

By telling the biblical narratives in their entirety, Bible Explorer mirrors the church's own attitude to the Bible: "serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light."[23] More than this, however, by focussing on the overarching narrative of the Bible, BX is being faithful to "the essence of Christianity, the basic content and the central distinctive structure of the Christian faith"[24]. Although the Bible can be read as a collection of stories, to do so is to miss the central fact that these narratives "form part of a chain, a continuum in time"[25]. David Ford explicitly supports the reading of the Old and New Testaments together "for their mutual theological illumination"[26], including this as one of his nine recommended maxims for studying the Bible. Handling the Bible in a manner consistent with Christian belief is important in an educational setting because it adheres to Ninian Smart's principle that religious education should reflect the distinctive nature of religion[27]. Although his principle is uncontroversial in itself, problems arise in finding a representation of religion that all can support. In the absence of agreement on this, the focus of attention must surely be the "first-order evidence" of the religions themselves, including the beliefs and practices of the faithful[28]. In looking at the sacred texts of Christianity, BX is engaging directly with the primary evidence; as such, it takes an entirely appropriate approach to teaching the subject.

Staying close to the biblical story also brings difficulties for the programme: "in Christianity, truth is in the story... Story truth is dynamic in nature and invites us to participate."[29] To some extent, BX is caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, working so intimately with the beating heart of Christianity opens BX to the charge of confessionalism. On the other hand, the programme is so full of 'learning about' the Christian story that presenters worry

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[23] *Dei Verbum* (Rome: Second Vatican Council Document, 1965), 12.
[24] Clark Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 167.
[25] Gabriel Josipovici, "The Bible: Dialogue and Distance" in *Ways of Reading the Bible* (ed. Michael Wadsworth; Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), 142.
[26] David Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 195.
[27] Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity,* 77-78.
[28] L. Philip Barnes and Andrew Wright, "Romanticism, Representations of Religion and Critical Religious Education", *BJRE,* 28:1 (2006): 75.
[29] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 182.

there is only limited time to develop the 'learning from' requirement of the syllabus. Many BXers would relish the opportunity for a greater depth of engagement with the children's questions, for example. The interviewees all articulated their discomfort at trying to negotiate this tension. An interesting solution to the dilemma is suggested by Jeff Astley. He argues that it is a mistake to think of secular religious education about Christianity and Christian formative education (or nurture) as "two separate and completely distinct activities"[30]. Rather than being different in kind, the two forms of teaching are different only in the degree to which they expect to promote religious feeling[31]. The classroom experience of the interviewees tends to confirm the accuracy of Astley's assertion. The Bible Explorer programme is unusual in that it is welcomed in both faith and non-faith schools. The contrast between learning about and learning from religion is generally understood to be a problem only in a secular environment[32]; by straddling the divide, BX sets the debate in a new framework. The difficulty is now centred, not on the distinction between education and nurture, but on those classroom practicalities which affect the depth of learning which takes place. The material presented to all pupils changes very little; with some classes, however, it is possible to set a more personal and reflective tone. Drawing out the children's questions, for example, can facilitate their learning. Several BXers described how a good relationship with a particular classroom teacher can allow a session to flourish. In these instances, both the 'learning about' and 'learning from' components of the programme are enriched. One Year 5 child announced at the end of a class that she had never before realised how kind God was: is her comment an example of 'learning about' God or 'learning from' the stories? Surely, the answer is both. The learning about/from distinction was introduced, in part, to distinguish the goals of religious education from those of Christian nurture.[33] If there is no rigid dividing line between education and nurture, then it makes little sense to structure religious learning in terms of these two elements. Just as the distinction is unhelpful in theory, so, too, it fails to reflect the practicalities of how learners master their subject. Children, as well as adults, will struggle to 'learn about' anything if they are not personally

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[30] Jeff Astley, "The place of understanding in Christian education and education about Christianity" in *Critical Perspectives on Christian Education* (eds. Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis; Leominster: Gracewing, 1994), 112.

[31] Astley recognises, however, that a difference in degree can become a difference in kind at the extreme limits of the continuum – see Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology,* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002), 58.

[32] Elina Hella and Andrew Wright, "Learning 'about' and 'from' religion: phenomenology, the Variation Theory of Learning and Religious Education in Finland and the UK", *BJRE* 31:1 (2009), 56.

[33] Vivienne Baumfield, "Pedagogy," in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 207.

engaged with the material. Conversely, the process of 'learning about' a topic can be enriched if a greater depth of individual involvement is encouraged. The school feedback forms emphasise the truth of this: there is a marked correlation between the active engagement with a session that teachers noted in their pupils and the overall success of that session. Just as education and religious nurture exist on a continuum, so, too, 'learning about' and 'learning from' belong together.

There are other, more practical, outcomes to accepting that the nurture/education distinction is a false dichotomy[34]. In the first place, Christian teachers can positively embrace the current 'learning about' requirement of RE, acknowledging the potential here rather than lamenting its limitations. Bible Explorer, of course, has always recognised the inherent possibilities, but individual presenters can perhaps relax a little and feel assured of the educational value of their work. The pressure to accede to a contrary view is very strong in British culture: a recent research project found that "Christians believe that sharing their faith would be unprofessional whereas atheists believed that sharing their beliefs could be a positive contribution to an RE lesson"[35]. A second consequence of Astley's argument is that teaching materials and methods designed with Christian nurture in mind may not be the anathema that secular society supposes[36]. Although the Bible Explorer programme does not fall into this category because its provenance is educational, the BXers themselves are, by definition, practising Christians. Schools, however, can feel confident that the faith commitment of BX presenters in no way debars them from delivering a RE programme that is universally acceptable.

Astley's insights may go some way towards alleviating worries about the widespread requirement that equal time be given to 'learning about' and 'learning from' the Bible[37]. Nevertheless, the lack of time for reflection[38] and consolidation[39] in BX sessions remains problematic, both for presenters in the classroom and for the programme as a whole. If a central aim of RE is to achieve a depth of learning for pupils, then anything which hinders this is a potentially serious drawback. The amount of material to be covered in a session sets

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[34] Astley, "Christian education and education about Christianity", 115.
[35] L. Revell and R. Walters, *Christian and Atheist Student RE Teachers' Attitudes to Objectivity and Professionalism* (report on research project, Religious Education Council Newsletter, June 2010), quoted in Watson, "Why RE matters", 16.
[36] Astley, "Christian education and education about Christianity", 115.
[37] Yvette, p.11
[38] Ellen, p.8.
[39] Yvette, p.5.

the tempo for that lesson. Angela describes how the pace of lessons means that children "get one bite at the cherry"[40] before the presenter moves on. Simon noted that, for some schools in his area, Bible Explorer is viewed "as a bit lightweight because it's just storytelling the whole time"[41]: the skilled work of unpacking those stories is not included in the programme. Indeed, several of the interviewees commented that "talking about spirituality" with this age group is "really hard"[42] and expressed their sympathy for non-specialist classroom teachers who find it difficult, "especially if they're not believers of any sort"[43]. Bible Explorer is perhaps missing a valuable opportunity to share expertise in this area. Ian, however, would disagree[44]: he understands the in-depth work of analysing a story as flowing out of the relationship a teacher has with both a class and the school. This requires great sensitivity and ability and cannot be rushed. As such, it lies outside the BX remit. In contrast, Ellen wonders whether presenters "should be cutting out some stories and actually allowing a bit more time just to have reflective questions which the children can answer."[45] Interestingly, there are reports of BXers offering an additional session to schools, in order to have the time to respond to the children's thoughts and questions.

The focus on learning the overarching narrative of the Bible may place an unhelpful emphasis on the children's cognitive response to the stories. This is particularly inappropriate in RE because there is much more to religion than its cognitive dimension. Astley has described coming to faith in terms of falling in love[46]. If RE is to do justice to the complete gamut of religion, it is essential not to "dismiss the significance of religious emotion and the subjective appropriation of religion"[47] in favour of a dispassionate intellectual approach: "real understanding involves hearts as well as minds"[48]. This is the point at which the distinction between nurture and education falls down. When an emotional response (to a story, for example) is triggered, an encounter with the transformative power integral to all religion is made possible.

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[40] Angela, p.2.
[41] Simon, p.5.
[42] Yvette, p.5.
[43] Yvette, p.5.
[44] Ian, p.9-10.
[45] Ellen, p.8.
[46] Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology,* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002), 29.
[47] Jeff Astley, "Crossing the Divide?" in *Inspiring Faith in Schools: Studies in Religious Education* (eds. Marius Felderhof et al.; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 176.
[48] Watson, "Why religious education matters", 16.

> All decent RE possesses the potential of being religiously transformative, simply by displaying the transformative stories, ideals, concepts, doctrines, spiritual practices, worship, loves and lives of religion. A good description of any spiritually powerful and effective concept, vision or framework can transform the lives of those who have come to understand it, if only they are allowed to come close enough to it. In studying transforming ideas, one lays oneself open to the possibility of transformation… The better the education and the understanding, the more likely and more authentic the religious response.[49]

In offering children an opportunity "to come close" to the Bible, the space is created for a potential face-to-face encounter with the spiritual power of Christianity. For some, this will be a truly "life changing" [50] experience, as one child wrote on her feedback form. Ellen is certain that "the biggest constraint in teaching and presenting Bible Explorer is time"[51]; Ian agrees, suggesting that the optimum length for each lesson would be an hour and fifteen minutes[52]. Would more time for reflection in class lead to more life changing encounters for pupils? Even if this were the case, it is far from clear that such an outcome would be desirable. Firstly, it would shift the goal of Bible Explorer further along the continuum towards evangelism and Christian nurture; this would weaken its rationale, particularly in relation to non-faith schools. BXers are already painfully conscious of the balancing act that is required in the classroom between confident and enthusiastic biblical teaching and an inappropriate desire to produce Christian converts. Religious truth-claims will always be controversial and presenters are wise to be alert to the possibility of indoctrination[53]. Secondly, it would exacerbate an already significant concern about pastoral care. Even today, there are (rare) instances of children responding to the biblical story: Martin, for example, described two pupils who ran to speak to him after a class, saying "we didn't used to believe in God before you taught us and now we do"[54]. Quite what children do with this new found faith is unclear as there is no pastoral follow-up to the programme and no mechanism for introducing children to a local church: in this sense, BX is purely educational. The gap between school and church is not easily crossed by a programme such as Bible Explorer, and it is perhaps unreasonable to place the burden of doing so on BX. The BXer's educational task is to deliver "a good description"[55] of the biblical material, introducing pupils to "the idea of God"[56]. The programme does not expect to promote deep religious feeling, although

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[49] Astley, "Crossing the Divide?" 183-184.
[50] Photo #300.
[51] Ellen, p.4.
[52] Ian, p.1.
[53] Watson, "Why RE matters", 16.
[54] Martin, p.2.
[55] Astley, "Crossing the Divide?", 183.
[56] Angela, p.2.

presenters recognise that it can happen: "I tell the story; the [Holy Spirit] opens eyes, if they're to be opened."[57] On balance, it appears that a little more time per session might be beneficial to the children's learning, especially with classes that respond well to a more reflective style of teaching. Presenters have the freedom to edit their material within the basic framework of the hand signs, so it is possible to alter the content of a session and thus its timing. The BX training manual notes that keeping to time becomes a "bigger problem as you teach more Bible Explorers" and advises presenters to "keep each slot short and crisp"[58]. It is understandable that BXers are keen to explore the biblical stories with their pupils, and this desire is compounded by the requirement that children 'learn from' the material presented. However, following Astley's reasoning should allow BXers to feel confident about the value of the programme as it currently stands. A move towards Christian nurture is likely to reduce the educational appeal of the programme, and may limit its uptake by community schools. Neither a significant increase in lesson time nor a change to the programme's content would be recommended, therefore.

2) **The delivery method**

Bible Explorer's lively delivery method was praised in more than 88% of all the school feedback forms. The programme was launched just a year after the publication of Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*[59], a text that went on to influence many schools and teachers[60]. BX exposes youngsters to a range of learning styles and a variety of teaching techniques. It may not be too fanciful to suggest that, in doing so, the programme reflects the creativity in expression found throughout the Bible[61]. BXers may well be surprised to recognise so much of Robert Alter's description of "the art of biblical narrative". Retelling a Bible story, however, requires the closest attention to its structure and language. The survey respondents mentioned with pleasure the degree of detail that they have discovered in the text, for example. Yvette spoke about encouraging her pupils to fill in the gaps in some stories: Alter, too, comments on the "reticence"[62] of the Old Testament,

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[57] Angela, p.8.
[58] *BX OT Trainee Manual*, p.55.
[59] H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
[60] Nigel Fancourt, "Differentiation," in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012)*,* 218.
[61] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 203.
[62] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114

describing how the narrative is "selectively silent in a purposeful way"[63], often to create "a sense of ambiguous depths in character"[64]. Such concentrated attention on the narrative has the further effect of deepening an individual's biblical knowledge and understanding – again, something noted by the survey respondents. Interestingly, this is precisely the effect that Alter predicts:

> Such attentiveness, I think, is important not only for those curious about matters of narrative technique, whether ancient or modern, but also for anyone who wants to come to terms with the significance of the Bible… It seems to me that we shall come much closer to the range of intended meanings – theological, psychological, moral or whatever – of the biblical tale by understanding precisely how it is told.[65]

In his introduction, Alter talks about the literary differences between the Old and New Testaments: the New Testament is written in a different language, at a later time and according to different traditions. He continues, "It therefore does not seem to me that these two bodies of ancient literature can be comfortably set in the same critical framework."[66] Might his caveat also apply to sharing a similar delivery method in the classroom? All but one of the survey respondents commented on the differences between the two Testaments; many also noted that the Old Testament programme is easier to present than the New, possibly because it has a strong chronological storyline. The New Testament, it was suggested, involves more teaching than storytelling. The school feedback forms confirm the popularity of the Old Testament programme: it is more widely taught and more highly praised than its New Testament counterpart. Nevertheless, both programmes are successful and there are good reasons for approaching the two Testaments in a similar style. Not only does this reinforce their essential unity, but the emphasis on storytelling reflects the primacy of story within Christianity. In addition, the delivery method clearly engages pupils and enables their learning. The survey respondents noted how frequently children have "lightbulb moments", grasping the connections between the Testaments, for example. Kieran Egan has written about the importance of the imagination in teaching and learning, arguing that the "imagination is a powerful and neglected tool" [67] in the classroom. He

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[63] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 115.
[64] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative, 115.*
[65] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 179.
[66] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* ix.
[67] Kieran Egan, *Teaching as Storytelling: an Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 18.

suggests that we should "provide children with things to think about that challenge and stimulate"[68]: Bible stories clearly achieve this goal.

The presenters, too, thoroughly enjoy delivering the Bible Explorer programme. The pleasure that is taken in BX is significant, both for the teacher and the learner. Robert Alter makes a strong case for taking delight in the Old Testament:

> Religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, men and the perilously momentous realm of history.[69]

It is clear from the survey responses that the enthusiasm of the presenters rubs off on the children: "we all enjoy exploring the stories together."[70] Mary Grey writes that "too little is *eros* discussed in educational contexts"[71]. By the word, 'eros', Grey is referring to the energy and pleasure that come when "epiphanies of connection"[72] occur – for the children, these will often be those 'lightbulb' moments that happen when new insights arise. In practical terms, it matters that the presenters enjoy delivering the programme because no one is paid by Bible Explorer to teach BX. The survey respondents cited both their pleasure in the programme and their sense of calling as the reasons for continuing as BXers. Each BXer is free to present the material in their own way and this allows a degree of individuality to colour the programme. As we saw from the survey data, a wide range of methods are used to engage the children, some of which reflect the particular skills of a presenter. Data from the feedback forms demonstrate the quality of the volunteer workforce as a whole and the positive impact that this has in the classroom. In writing about the future of Christian education, David Ford suggests that "far more important than the details of curriculum are the teachers"[73]. BXers themselves recognise the degree of privilege and responsibility that working with children entails. One respondent wrote that "the presenter's demeanour as a Christian may have as much effect for the Kingdom as the material"[74]. It is clear that the BX presenters themselves are an extremely valuable part of the programme's success.

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[68] Egan, *Teaching as Storytelling,* 19.
[69] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 189.
[70] Survey #27.
[71] Mary Grey, "Feminist Images of Redemption in Education" in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: a Reader on Theology and Christian Education* (eds. Jeff Astley et al.; Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), 224.
[72] Grey, "Redemption in Education", 224.
[73] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology,* 161.
[74] Survey #51.

3) **The aims and outcomes of Bible Explorer**

The BX programme was designed to support schools in delivering their Locally Agreed Syllabus on religious education[75]. The majority of interviewees were anxious that the programme does not fit exactly with their own Agreed Syllabus, and this can clearly prove awkward in some areas. Simon, for example, described how the Bible is required teaching for the younger age groups in his Borough; BX was devised for the top two primary years, and so is inappropriate for use in most of his local schools. The exceptions to this are those church schools which have specifically included BX within the curriculum. With the permission of the BX office, Ian adapted the programme for Year 4 pupils, with limited success: the children struggled with some of the material, especially the worksheets[76]. Several presenters noted that BX misses out to tailor-made programmes, which are designed to dovetail neatly with local requirements. Some also reported cancellations because BX was no longer a good "fit"[77] with their Agreed Syllabus. Yvette saw this as a major concern and a significant limitation to the programme: "if it's not in the Syllabus and we're claiming it's RE, then that's not right, is it?"[78] Her advice was to make sure that the programme is included in the Locally Agreed Syllabus in all those areas where presenters are active. This is clearly a better option than reshaping the programme to fit the Procrustean bed of such syllabuses, especially given the limitations of "curriculum Christianity"[79] and the worthwhile content of BX. However, Bible Explorer will always remain vulnerable to local opponents even where it is included in the Agreed Syllabus, since a change to that Syllabus could exclude the programme at any time.

A second explicit aim of BX is to generate enthusiasm for the Bible amongst school-aged children. Given the number of successful sessions recorded in the school feedback forms, pupils are evidently enjoying the classroom presentations. Whether this enjoyment results in a lasting enthusiasm for the Bible is unclear. There is some limited evidence that children are engaging with the Bible outside the BX sessions – reading biblical stories in the classroom, for example. It would require further research to discover the extent to which this effect endures beyond the half term that the programme runs, however. Anecdotal evidence

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[75] http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Showcharity/RegisterOfCharities. Accessed 11/03/2013.
[76] Ian, p.2.
[77] Naomi, p.10.
[78] Yvette, p.4.
[79] Hayward, "Curriculum Christianity", 153.

suggests that individual presenters are remembered with great affection by their former students.

The school feedback forms also demonstrated a range of positive learning outcomes in pupils beyond those expressly intended by the programme's designers. Teachers commented not only on the extent of the children's biblical knowledge and understanding, but also on the new attitudes they saw in their pupils. These included confidence, working as a team, enthusiasm for RE and "religious tolerance" [80].

Barnes suggests that the personal development of pupils is one of three essential criteria to consider in evaluating an approach to religious education[81]. As noted earlier, the necessity for pupils to be engaged and interested in their learning is not limited to RE. Trevor Cooling, for instance, argues that "teaching without a concern for personal development is not education"[82]. Bible Explorer unquestionably captures the imagination and attention of pupils, providing them with a secure foundation on which to build their understanding of Christianity. Where the programme falls down, perhaps, is in the extent to which it addresses the children's spiritual and moral development. Eaude challenges RE teachers to demonstrate what the distinctive contribution of religion is to both spirituality and morality[83]. These aspects of the Jewish and Christian faiths are implicit in the biblical texts, but, given the age and understanding of the children, some explicit unpacking of the narrative for its moral and spiritual insights would be required to fulfil Eaude's challenge. Once again, arguments about the timing and content of Bible Explorer come to the forefront here. In an already full programme comprising just ten hours of teaching, it is surely unrealistic to attempt to convey yet more information. Perhaps a slowing of pace, as considered earlier, or a more reflective approach, would allow children to begin to develop their spiritual and moral understanding of the stories. Better an interesting, if concise, introduction to the subject for this age group than an overly long attempt to convey "the wisdom of [both] traditions"[84].

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[80] Photo #618

[81] Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity,* 197. The other criteria are the extent to which an approach reflects the nature of religion and also contributes to social cohesion.

[82] Trevor Cooling, "Faith, RE and whole school issues," in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012), 94.

[83] Tony Eaude, "Spiritual and Moral Development" in *Debates in Religious Education* (ed. L. Philip Barnes; London: Routledge, 2012)*,* 130.

[84] Eaude, "Spiritual and Moral Development", 130.

Eaude's interest in the holistic development of pupils sits comfortably alongside Felderhof's insistence that the focus of RE teaching must be the young people themselves[85]. If religions are allowed to take centre stage in education, what ensues is a "beauty parade"[86] in front of pupils. By putting the children first, the focus shifts onto each child's spiritual welfare, moral development and individual fulfilment: RE then becomes an exploration of how the religions seek to promote these dimensions of human life. Such an approach fits the existing legislation, is explicit about the values it seeks to promote and has the flourishing of future generations at its heart. There seems to be a coalescence of interest in this model of RE, with a number of experts in the field exploring the benefits of "teaching virtue". David Ford has written passionately about the importance of wise and creative thinking in theology[87]; Julian Stern advocates sincerity as the way to "a better future"[88] for RE; Andrew Wright posits the four key principles of freedom, tolerance, wisdom and the pursuit of truth as a framework for critical religious education[89]; and Philip Barnes has developed a plausible case for reconnecting religious education with moral education[90]. Just as Bible Explorer fails to fit neatly within the current dominant models of religious education, so, too, it sits uneasily within a virtue-centred approach. If such a view of RE gains widespread support in the UK, BX may be forced to adapt in order to survive. In the current context, however, and in a society where few children know the biblical stories, Bible Explorer performs a useful service in introducing the Christian narrative to pupils in an accessible and lively way.

The Implications of the Institutional Structure of Bible Explorer

The way that Bible Explorer has been set up as an organisation shapes not only how it operates but also its educational impact. There are three key areas to consider here.

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[85] Marius Felderhof, "Afterword," in *Inspiring Faith in Schools: Studies in Religious Education* (eds. Marius Felderhof et al.; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 190.

[86] Felderhof, "Afterword", 190.

[87] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology",* Chapter 10*.*

[88] Stern, *Teaching RE,* 105.

[89] Barnes and Wright, "Romanticism, representations of religion and critical RE", 73-74..

[90] L. Philip Barnes, "The Demise and Rebirth of Moral Education in English Religious Education" in *Teaching Virtue: the Contribution of Religious Education* (eds. Marius Felderhof and Penny Thompson; London: Bloomsbury, 2014)*,* 54-70.

1) **The Use of Volunteers**

The programme's presenters are not paid by the charity. This raises a number of challenges for the running of the programme. Firstly, it results in a limited pool of possible presenters: "it's hard to find the people for it"[91]. Many BXers have retired from work or are stay-at-home parents; some work flexible hours or are self-employed. A few are paid by local churches or educational trusts to work in schools. Ellen has concerns about the future of the programme: "my anxiety at the moment is that the presenters seem to be getting more ancient and where are the young ones? Where are they coming from?"[92] She has identified the "need to earn money"[93] as a major factor in the decision not to become a BX presenter. Martin agrees with her: he was adamant that, if he could be paid to present the programme, "I wouldn't do anything else." The problem is compounded by the fact that volunteers must pay for their own training. Simon described his experience of becoming a BXer:

> I didn't sign up for it until I was being paid by a church who would then pay for me to go and do the training. So the hard sell was me selling it to the Vicar and the Church Council, and saying 'this is worth investing in'.[94]

It is perhaps the requirement that presenters fund their own training that keeps ongoing professional development to a minimum. Yvette is "horrified by what [Bible Explorer] don't do in the way of training; absolutely horrified."

> Anybody could be trained as a BX presenter and is hardly monitored at all and could be doing anything… There could be so much bad practice going on because they don't train people after their initial training, which is only being done second-hand… But the thing that I'm most worried about is that, if you get a loose cannon out there, Bible Explorer could be closed down.[95]

The school feedback forms suggest that, contrary to Yvette's worries, the volunteer workforce are of a high standard. References are also required from a would-be presenter's current church leadership before training commences. It may be, however, that schools which have experienced bad practice by a BXer have chosen not to return a feedback form. A better measure of the potential problem would be to follow up all those schools which have not made a repeat booking for the programme, in order to ascertain the reason for their decision. All presenters are required to log their BX bookings centrally, so this research is possible, if time-consuming. Regardless of the evidence, it seems clear that quality control

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[91] Simon, p.9.
[92] Ellen, p.6.
[93] Ellen, p.1.
[94] Simon, p.9.
[95] Yvette, p.11-12.

remains an area of potential weakness for the programme, which an absence of ongoing training only exacerbates. WTB Ministries reserves the right to terminate the accreditation of any BX presenter whose lifestyle or classroom performance falls below acceptable standards[96]. The worry here is the extent of the damage that might be inflicted on the programme before the relationship with a rogue presenter is terminated.

The reliance on a volunteer workforce also leads to difficulties in strategic planning. Geographic coverage cannot be guaranteed nor is it possible to plan very far in advance. Moreover, volunteers report feeling overstretched: "I know that sounds bad but we're covering quite a lot of schools between a few of us."[97] Continuity also becomes a problem. In my own area, for example, there have been difficulties in fulfilling all the requests for repeat bookings of the programme.

In financial terms, it is understandable that Bible Explorer relies on volunteers. Such an approach also guarantees passion and commitment in the workforce, and the evidence suggests that these qualities produce good educational outcomes. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that this strategy leads to some considerable challenges, and the long term viability of this staffing policy is uncertain. Whether these limitations outweigh the obvious benefits of this manner of working is debatable.

2) **Bible Explorer as a Stand-alone Programme**

In total, the Bible Explorer Old and New Testament programmes comprise roughly ten hours of teaching. The BX package is designed to introduce children to the Bible; it does not aim to cover all the Christian input required by Locally Agreed Syllabuses, nor does it seek to bring children into the Church. BX presenters are required not to promote other ministries in the context of a Bible Explorer lesson[98], although some will offer to lead an assembly in the school after completion of the programme. As noted earlier, no pastoral care is offered to pupils, nor does the programme seek to establish direct links between schools and local church communities. In this sense, the programme stands alone. In addition, there is no educational follow-up. For one interviewee, this is a concern. Yvette sees Bible Explorer as "a brilliant product"[99], but she worries that "if everything just goes back to what it was

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[96] *BX OT Trainee Manual*, p.53.
[97] Naomi, p.6.
[98] *BX OT Trainee Manual*, p.47.
[99] Yvette, p.4.

before, then you could argue that the value of it is limited"[100]. She is supported as a volunteer by a local Trust which produces its own RE materials and develops lesson plans for teachers.

> Bible Explorer is one of the tools that I use. It's a very useful tool because I find that what it does is it makes kids suddenly think, 'wow, RE's great; I love RE!' which for the teachers is useful, so long as they're not going to go back then to their boring ploddish stuff that they might have been doing before. That's where coming in and saying, 'Can I help? Do you want some resources?' is a helpful follow up.[101]

Yvette is an RE teacher by training and it is clear that she has a passion for the subject. Her concern points to problems with RE teaching in general. However, it seems unreasonable to expect Bible Explorer to tackle these single-handedly. If BX encourages children to enjoy the subject, then, at the very least, it has achieved its stated aim.

A further potential problem for BX is that, as a stand-alone programme, it is not always seen as a strategic investment for local churches. Firstly, there are training costs to be considered, and these must be balanced against how often the programme is actually used in schools. As Simon explained, "you can only do it once a year with the group; once they've done it, they've done it."[102] Secondly, presenters are contractually bound not to promote other church activities during a BX session.[103] In contrast, coming into schools to lead assemblies allows a church to have prolonged contact with a school and frees the worship leaders to invite pupils to other church events. Angela commented:

> I probably wouldn't push Bible Explorer if they're doing 'Open the Book' because they're going in every week, sometimes for years, acting out a story… I wouldn't bother because they're getting the stories. They might not be getting them in order and the big picture, but they are getting the stories. Sometimes in an assembly, you're just doing one story; you've got 20 minutes, you've got more of a time to ask for a response.[104]

Simon was eloquent in describing the dilemma for churches: "we would say it isn't enough just to teach there… [The children] might end up going to a different church"[105]. There is a pronounced tension here between the evangelistic aims of local churches and the educational focus of Bible Explorer. If the Christian community accepts that the content of the BX programme is valuable, then churches must also recognise the importance of preserving Bible Explorer's educational integrity. Churches should rejoice that the Bible is

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[100] Yvette, p.4.
[101] Yvette, p.3.
[102] Simon, p.1.
[103] Simon, p.3.
[104] Angela, p.8.
[105] Simon, p.3.

being taught in primary schools; their own sectarian interests should take second place to this.

3) **Bible Explorer as a National Ministry**

A national network such as Bible Explorer will struggle to provide the same support, regular face-to-face communication, and encouragement, as volunteers enjoy within a local church-based ministry. Simon described being "isolated"[106] as a BXer: "there doesn't feel a strong enough network"[107]. Several of the interviewees echoed his sentiment: "if BX were going to help out a bit, they need to put you in contact with people more"[108]. Isolation is a real problem for the programme if it results in a lack of motivation amongst volunteers: for some busy BXers, the programme just "drifts to the back of your mind"[109]. Others noted that there is less incentive to nurture a programme that is not "home grown"[110]. Alongside a lack of emotional support, several BXers lamented the lack of practical help. Bookings for the programme were difficult to manage locally: "I thought there would be more done centrally to help us get appointments or even to resource us to get other people on board"[111]. It is evident that those BXers who are backed by Christian educational trusts or local churches enjoy significant practical benefits in terms of training and the organisation of bookings. Bible Explorer does offer an additional layer of support to presenters in the form of Moses Groups. However, the survey data revealed that these groups are under-utilised. In contrast, nearly 80% of survey respondents had the support of a prayer group. Given the value of the presenters to the success of the programme, an increase in the emotional and practical support offered to BXers seems overdue.

The Wider Implications of Bible Explorer

During the twentieth century, Sunday school attendance in the UK dropped from 55% of children to just 4%[112]. Although church schools remain popular with some families, many children today have no experience of Christianity. Withers notes that "spiritual growth

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[106] Simon, p.8.
[107] Simon, p.8.
[108] Angela, p.12.
[109] Simon, p.8.
[110] Simon, p.8.
[111] Simon, p.7.
[112] Margaret Withers, *Mission-shaped Children: Moving towards a Child-centred Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2010), 11.

comes through teaching and learning as well as experience"[113]. She challenges parishes to support the spiritual life of the schools within their boundaries[114]. This might involve offering children a genuine welcome when they do come to church, but is more likely to require the provision of quality in-depth Christian input within a school setting, as and when requested by teaching staff. Jeff Astley, too, points out that "learning is central to religion"[115]. Given that Bible Explorer is successful in the teaching and learning that it offers to schools, what lessons might it afford for the wider educational mission of the church?

The Bible Explorer programme has its roots in the rich soil of "ordinary theology". Astley defines this as "the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind." [116] BX would not survive without the commitment of ordinary Christians, who act on their passion to bring God's word into schools. Astley's exploration of ordinary theology helps to illuminate two significant dimensions of the Bible Explorer programme. Firstly, Astley examines the characteristics of ordinary theology; some of the categories he identifies are particularly helpful in understanding what has nourished and shaped the programme and the BXers. Secondly, in considering how we learn our faith, Astley highlights some of the processes that are at work when BX is presented in the classroom.

Bible Explorer and Ordinary Theology

Just as Astley understands religious education and religious nurture to be part of the same continuum, so, too, he sees ordinary and academic theology as being different only in degree:

> It is not true to say that all ordinary theology is thoroughly spiritual or experiential; nor that every example of academic theology is irredeemably impersonal or theoretical. We should continue to think instead of our continuous spectrum, the extremes of which are easier to distinguish than are the intermediate (or 'mixed') forms.[117]

Nevertheless, ordinary theology is "more deeply earthed in certain religious phenomenon (such as spirituality and values) than is the majority of academic theology"[118]. This is because

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[113] Withers, *Mission-shaped Children,* 42.
[114] Withers, *Mission-shaped Church,* 86.
[115] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 18.
[116] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* Chapter 1.
[117] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 86.
[118] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 95.

it grows, not in a sterile and hygienic environment, but in the midst of the daily struggles we all experience. For Walter Wink, "the problem of the academy"[119] is precisely its "objectivist ideology"[120]; in separating "theory from practice, mind from body, reason from emotion, knowledge from experience"[121], the academy loses the ability to address the concrete problems of human life. In contrast, ordinary theology cannot be removed from a personal context because it is part of the lived faith of the individual believer[122]: its focus is human fulfilment and "living well"[123]. As such, it will always reflect the more general concerns of the laity rather than the functional responsibilities of the clergy or the "controversies of the academy"[124] . As a personal form of theological reflection, it draws on what is meaningful and relevant for each individual, echoing their spirituality and their experiences of salvation. Indeed, Astley describes it as a "kneeling, celebratory theology"[125] because its roots are in prayer and worship rather than critical thought. This connection with the spiritual and the everyday ensures that such theology is marked out by its authenticity[126]. Building on the work of Nicola Slee, whose research suggests that women are more likely than men to express their theology in "concrete, narrative and personal ways of thinking"[127], Astley wonders whether women's faith is therefore more likely to be rooted in the "Bible and prayer"[128] than in conceptual analysis. There is much in Astley's characterisation of ordinary theology that resonates with the description of Bible Explorer. The programme is immersed in prayer, for example, and the volunteers teach this material because they value it and find it meaningful in their own lives: "I do not want to see a generation of children growing up who have no understanding of the importance of the Bible historically, as literature, or as the way to make sense of the world in which we live.[129]" Hella and Wright argue that "the desire to live a good or fruitful life is shared by most human beings" and is the only justification for religious education in a plural society[130]. Such an understanding of RE sees the interests of ordinary theology, the BXer and the pupils as complementary and positive. Moreover, there is a real

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[119] Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 5.
[120] Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 5.
[121] Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation,* 5.
[122] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 59.
[123] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 38.
[124] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 52.
[125] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 74.
[126] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 124.
[127] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 81-82.
[128] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 82.
[129] Survey #30.
[130] Hella and Wright, "Learning 'about' and 'from' religion", 57.

sense of vocation and joy amongst BXers: "I love being able to present the Bible to so many children, of any religious mix, when I know that each story is Good News."[131] Put simply, many BXers are made happy by sharing what they believe to be the world's "best story"[132]. Astley also alludes to a possible explanation for the fact that fewer men than women choose to present the course: the biblical material may complement a more feminine approach to faith and so appeal particularly to women. This is an interesting area for further research.

Astley's defence of ordinary theology against the charge that it is too concrete and anthropomorphic brings together some intriguing ideas[133]. He reminds us that metaphor and story are not only appropriate for children but lie at the heart of the Christian faith and our sense of how the world is.

> The primary answer to the question of why religious metaphorical statements are so powerful is that they are in continuity with the way we think ordinarily. We are not usually conscious of the metaphorical character of our thought, of seeing 'this' in terms of 'that', of finding the thread of similarity amid dissimilars, but it is the only way a child's world can be constructed or our worlds expanded and transformed.[134]

In addition, the biblical texts themselves use language that is both imaginative and figurative to think about God. For Astley, this common thread of metaphorical language links the Bible, the way we view our world, and the theology of children and ordinary Christians. His argument is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it stresses the value of the biblical narratives for Christian education: "the power of story in promoting religious learning is undeniable."[135] Story expresses truth about God in the same way that humans, young and old, make sense of the world. John Barton develops this theme further, arguing that story is more than an appropriate vehicle for communicating truth; some truths can only be expressed in narrative form.

> By drawing the reader into the story, narrative texts achieve a disclosure of human possibilities (and human limitations) which is arguably not available in any other way… There is an irreducibility about the narrative character of these works. The narratives disclose realities that cannot be disclosed in any other way and, equally, cannot (even after their disclosure) be restated in such a way that the narrative can then be discarded as having accomplished its task. Having got 'the point' of the narrative, we do not then ignore the

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[131] Survey #10.
[132] Angela, p.8.
[133] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 129-132.
[134] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 16.
[135] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 133.

> narrative and think simply about the point; on the contrary, we go back to the narrative better equipped to read it.[136]

Bible Explorer bucks the trend of much religious education by focussing each session on the biblical stories themselves. A danger of a themed approach to the Bible is that children collect a series of helpful points to remember and so neglect the broad sweep of the narrative. Astley emphasises the intrinsic value of the Christian story and defends those ordinary theologians who think and speak concretely about God against the charge of naïve anthropomorphism. Clark Pinnock, however, makes an even stronger assertion, attacking academic theology for "ignoring the narrative form of revelation. It has looked for truth in doctrine rather than in narrative. Even though the Bible is basically a storybook, theology has not bothered to orient itself in that way."[137] On this basis, Bible Explorer performs a valuable theological and educational service in bringing the story to a new generation. Secondly, Astley's defence of ordinary theology provides an explanation for the widespread enjoyment of Bible Explorer by both pupils and presenters: here are two groups of people (children and ordinary theologians) with a natural inclination to respond well to the "personal metaphors, analogies and narratives"[138] of the Christian tradition. Bringing these groups together is an exercise in serendipitous mutuality: remember the survey respondent who described her favourite time in the classroom as those moments when "we all enjoy exploring the stories together"[139].

It would be wrong to think there is no critical reflection on the material by either presenters or pupils – yes, the material is enjoyed, but the sessions are educational and the aim is to encourage a questioning attitude. Angela, for example, described how she includes the question 'Who is this man?' on her PowerPoint slides about Jesus in order to challenge the children to think about the answer for themselves[140]. Part of the task of Christian education is to develop "the reflective, questioning element in faith"[141], particularly in relation to religious beliefs. For Astley, this critical dimension matters firstly, because individuals only arrive at the beliefs they consider meaningful through a process of evaluation and secondly,

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[136] John Barton, "Disclosing Human Possibilities: Revelation and Biblical Stories" in *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (eds. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton; Aldershot: Ashgate: 2000) 55-56.

[137] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 182.

[138] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 129.

[139] Survey #27.

[140] Angela, p.8.

[141] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 143.

because unhealthy beliefs can taint the wellbeing of the whole person[142]. Astley is keen to stress that "being critical is a character trait that incorporates and promotes a range of virtues and attitudes"[143] beyond the purely intellectual. He would include spiritual wisdom, imagination and emotional intelligence in this, as well as sensitivity and attentiveness. If these are the qualities required to do theology, "then many 'ordinary people' may fulfil this part of the job description very well"[144]. Astley also notes that the big questions of faith do not change very much from childhood to old age: we all wonder why there is so much suffering in the world, for example. Ordinary 'God-talk' which is nurtured by an everyday faith and spirituality can provide just as valuable a response in the classroom as a highly academic reply[145]: this is a version of the authentic/accurate divide that was noted in the survey. Both approaches have their place and both can make an important contribution to teaching the faith. Astley's ideas are helpful in clarifying why the quality of the BX presenter can prove so decisive in achieving an outstanding session: the children's learning is likely to be enriched by an encounter with a living, critical faith. "Receiving the gospel is not a matter of having brains but of free personal response where imagination, thought and emotion are integrated."[146] There is the potential for real educational benefit when pupils encounter such integration modelled in the person of their teacher.

In examining the characteristics and possible criticisms of ordinary theology, Astley illuminates the personal dimension of Bible Explorer. As well as being an educational programme, BX represents an expression of faith. The BXers hold the Bible in high regard and believe in its value for a new generation: they show this in what they do. They have clearly thought carefully about their faith and are competent at communicating their beliefs. Indeed, Astley writes that "religious beliefs should not be called 'theology' unless they are to some extent articulated and reflected upon."[147] It is reassuring that the conclusions reached by Astley about a healthy ordinary theology overlap to a marked extent with the qualities that David Ford considers essential for the twenty-first century theologian. Ford arrives at his principles from a biblical starting-point, whereas Astley is engaged in a more empirical approach.

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[142] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 143.
[143] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 143.
[144] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 143.
[145] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 139.
[146] John Tinsley, "Tell it slant" in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: a Reader on Theology and Christian Education* (eds. Jeff Astley et al.; Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), 94.
[147] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 139.

> Each of the desirable elements in the shaping of a theologian is important in the theological interpretation of scripture: receptivity (first of all to the Holy Spirit), reading wisely and self-critically, prayer, collegial friendship, involvement in service, a well-nourished imagination, disciplined thinking, mature discernment, care and creativity in communication, and risky witnessing.[148]

Ford's comment reads like a job description for the ideal BX presenter. The element that is most likely to be lacking for BXers is that of collegial friendship – as already noted, several presenters expressed how lonely they find this ministry. Ford, like Astley, sees theology as open to all and "part of ordinary life"[149]; like Wright, he understands the goal of theology to be wisdom, enabling an answer to the fundamental question, "how are we to shape a wise life?"[150] Given this emphasis on personal faith, it would be interesting to explore the churchmanship of individual BXers in more detail. A mix of clergy and laity teach the programme. There are hints in the data that the lay BXers may come from a more evangelical background than the clergy. Is this a function of the religious education available to different congregations, perhaps? There is potential for further research in this area.

Bible Explorer and contextual learning

Astley argues that "the learning process contributes to what is learned"[151]. If he is correct about this, then both the roots of our faith and also the manner in which those roots were planted will shape the faith that later blossoms; these "early anchors"[152] will be a key part of each person's faith journey. The formative factors that stimulate the green shoots of faith derive from a range of learning opportunities, not all of them explicitly educational. Astley identifies various circumstances in which the learning of religious faith may take place: all are, to a greater or lesser extent, present in a BX session. This is no great surprise because all aspects of educational practice are part of a student's learning; indeed everything which occurs in the classroom will contribute to what is learnt[153]. The real value of Astley's work lies in drawing attention to the range of opportunities for faith learning which BX sessions encompass. As already noted, the teacher who models Christian virtues, for example, can enhance her pupils' understanding of Christianity.

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[148] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology,* 193.
[149] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology,* 1.
[150] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology,* 3.
[151] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 6.
[152] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 14.
[153] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 12.

Astley begins by exploring the role of affective learning[154]. Engaging the emotions is a vital element in moving from a dispassionate awareness of religious truth to becoming a participant in the faith. In bringing the biblical narratives to life, Bible Explorer invites children to engage their imaginations and explore the story for themselves. BXers spoke of the impact of the crucifixion narrative, for example: "you can hear a pin drop"[155]. Children also reported feeling sad or a little scared by some of the stories. Entering the world of the Bible can be a powerful and affecting experience for pupils, introducing them to some of the religious emotions generated by belief. Secondly, Astley notes the impact of the "character and demeanour"[156] of the teacher on what is learnt. Many BXers were clearly conscious of this: "the children may have very little contact with the Bible or Christians and so it is important that I do the best I can!"[157] The school feedback forms demonstrate not only the positive repercussions of a teacher's personality but the negative effects, too: six feedback forms explicitly criticised the presenter's attitude or conduct. Thirdly, Astley highlights the significance of "collateral learning"[158]. This includes not only the 'hidden curriculum'[159] but also the way in which a subject is presented. Clearly, there is much in common here with the previous category. A striking example of a presenter specifically aiming at collateral learning is the BXer who masters the name of every child in her class; she does this partly to generate a rapport with her pupils, but also because she hopes to reflect her understanding of God as the one who calls each of us by name[160]. Fourthly, the Bible itself suggests how Christian learning might take place. It exemplifies a form of teaching that not only seeks a personal response but also defies attempts to reduce God to an object that is known. Pinnock makes a related point when he stresses that the Bible's central purpose is to tell a story; "it is not appropriate to regard it as an encyclopaedia of general information or appeal to it as the source of disparate and incidental, infallible facts."[161] Kenneth Cragg helpfully contrasts the indirect and incarnational character of biblical revelation with the direct, verbal revelation of

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[154] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 7.
[155] Survey #53.
[156] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 7.
[157] Survey #43.
[158] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 9.
[159] Astley defines this as "a set of experiences through which people learn very effectively, but which are not explicitly labelled as *learning* experiences, and which normally are not consciously intended as such." *Ordinary Theology,* 9.
[160] Angela, p.9.
[161] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 171-172.

the Islamic faith[162]. The latter enjoys an "absoluteness of authority"[163] which is impossible for the Bible, the whole content of which "is documented from within experience"[164]. Developing this theme further, John Tinsley believes that the description of Jesus as "a prophet of indirect communication" is both an accurate portrait and an ideal for us to emulate:

> It is possible to be authoritative without being authoritarian. Christ is an authoritative sign but a sign that can be spoken against. His gospel is not a royal decree issued from on high to subjects below… 'Telling it slant' is more than an appropriate form of the gospel; it is its essential content, a manner incumbent upon the Christian communicator by the very nature of the gospel. The gospel is not only *what* is said, but *how* it is said.[165]

For Andrew Walker, it is not enough to say that God seeks a personal encounter with humanity. Instead, he emphasises the primacy of face-to-face communication in Christianity. He cites the significance of oral culture for the development of gospel communities, noting that Christians have always gathered together to share their story. More than that, however, the believer always meets God "in the relatedness of an 'I and thou' conversation"[166]. Indeed, Walker insists that God "cannot meet us in books, although he can speak to us through them"[167]. David Ford, too, writes of the import of face-to-face communication, believing it to be "at the heart of good teaching"[168]. All these strands point to the importance of personal connection and courteous communication in the "divine pedagogy of indirection"[169]. Bible Explorer attempts to honour this understanding of Christian education. Pupils are told the biblical stories and are helped to make sense of what they hear, but the conclusions they draw are their own; presenters do not hide behind technology, but engage on a personal level with the children, giving generously of themselves; and variety, energy and creativity are the norm, with storytelling rather than doctrinal instruction taking centre stage.

We noted earlier that Astley sees significant parallels between coming to religious faith and falling in love[170]. Learning in this context requires a change in our attitudes and values, as

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[162] Kenneth Cragg, "According to the Scriptures: Literacy and Revelation" in *Ways of Reading the Bible* (ed. Michael Wadsworth; Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981)*,* 23-37.
[163] Cragg, "According to the Scriptures", 35.
[164] Cragg, "According to the Scriptures", 25.
[165] John Tinsley, "Tell it slant", 88.
[166] Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 97.
[167] Walker, *Telling the Gospel,* 97.
[168] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology,* 161.
[169] Tinsley, "Tell it slant", 91.
[170] See, for example, Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 12.

well as our cognitive awareness. Teachers can become catalysts for such change when they communicate the value that a subject holds for them. In her interview, Yvette voiced her belief in the importance of this principle, describing how she is "as evangelical about Jane Austen and Shakespeare and poetry as I am about the Gospel, in the sense that I always wanted my kids to love English."[171] The school feedback forms indicate that a presenter's enthusiasm for the Bible can indeed influence their pupils. Not only were the majority of children engaged and interested during sessions, but some also changed their attitude to the topic as a whole: "RE has become a positive subject the children look forward to"[172]. However, there is a potential dark side to the influence of the charismatic educator. David Ford writes that "there are few more momentous events in one's life as a student than when one recognises someone as 'my' teacher"[173]. The current fears about the radicalization of young Muslims, for example, remind us that introducing the next generation to faith requires both "discernment and wisdom"[174] on the part of teachers. It was ever thus, however. Learning always requires an element of trust: "in human life, there is no other way"[175]. Saint Augustine points out that there is one thing that all students must discover for themselves, however brilliant their teacher, namely whether they can trust the truth of what that teacher tells them[176].

Astley's exploration of the forms of learning which shape faith has thrown a spotlight on some of the specific elements that underpin the success of Bible Explorer in the classroom. There is a richness to the programme which its simple format disguises. Without doubt, storytelling is a highly appropriate medium for teaching Christianity. It engages the emotions; allows face-to-face communication; requires the story teller to have a deep commitment both to the story and to passing it on; and enables the audience to see what a life lived as if the story were true might look like. In addition, by bridging the dualistic divisions of mind/body and reason/emotion, storytelling honours the "spiritual vision of the wholeness of the human person"[177]. One child confidently announced after a class in which she had played the character of Zerubbabel, "I will never forget him because I *was* him." The form

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[171] Yvette, p.10.

[172] Photo #921.

[173] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology"*, 162.

[174] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology,* 162.

[175] John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17.

[176] Augustine, *De Magistro,* 12.40, quoted in Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God: an Essay in Philosophical Theology,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 158.

[177] Grey, "Feminist Images of Redemption in Education", 218.

critic, Martin Dibelius, believes that story-tellers were an essential part of the expansion of the early church, meeting a specific need within the community[178]. There is a neat parallel here with our contemporary situation, especially if one accepts Walker's argument that our electronic world reintroduces a secondary oral culture: we live in an age that "understands spectacle and drama but wearies of texts"[179]. Perhaps the time is right for the Christian story-teller to become "of special significance"[180] once again?

Bible Explorer and the Logic of Evangelism

In its mission statement, WTB Ministries explains that its aim is to enable individuals to encounter God. Although the charity works with local churches, its primary focus is to develop people's individual relationship with God, by "igniting a passion for His Word". This may have the effect of building up church communities, but this is a secondary benefit. A similar theme is taken up and developed by William Abraham in his ground-breaking book, *The Logic of Evangelism,* first published in 1989 (five years after the launch of Bible Explorer). Abraham argues that initiation into the church must come after initiation into the kingdom of God[181]. This shifts the focus from church rites and human community onto God's action and the work of the Holy Spirit. For Abraham, "to be initiated into the rule of God is to encounter a transcendent reality that has entered history and to find oneself drawn up into the ultimate purposes of God for history and creation."[182] Such an initiation is *sui generis*, involving cognitive, moral, experiential, corporate, operational and disciplinary dimensions. Abraham distinguishes between Christian education or nurture and his vision of evangelism; the former is concerned with the lifelong development and learning necessary for discipleship, whereas evangelism focuses on "grounding people in the kingdom of God"[183]. This will involve a "set of intentional activities"[184], united by the goal of initiating an encounter with the divine. Bible Explorer would fail Abraham's test: although it engages with the cognitive, moral and experiential dimensions of his envisioned encounter, it makes no

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[178] Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (trans, Bertram Lee Woolf; Cambridge: James Clarke, 1982), 70.
[179] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 99.
[180] Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel,* 70.
[181] William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 98.
[182] Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism,* 101.
[183] Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism,* 108.
[184] Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism,* 95.

attempt to fulfil the remaining three aspects. For Abraham, the intention of the evangelist is essential and must be pure: anything other than a desire to initiate the hearer into the kingdom of God will corrupt the activity[185]. In this respect, however, BX remains remarkably close to Abraham's vision. The presenter's individual churchmanship remains completely in the shadows and sessions focus on the biblical narratives alone; the presenter is simply introducing the children to the notion of the Christian God. There is no underlying desire to force a decision for Christ or to acquire more church members, for example. Centuries earlier, Origen wrote that "we should use clearly Christian ideas and perspectives but not fuss about getting them acknowledged as such. It is more important that Christian beliefs should be seen to be true than uniquely Christian.[186]" This is another way of expressing Abraham's argument. Abraham is also adamant that "handing over Scripture as the sole content of the faith is inadequate"[187]. This is a reasonable point, but his argument is fascinating because the problems that he identifies with the biblical text are exactly the strengths we would celebrate today:

> [Scripture] is much too big and unwieldy as a summary of the faith; it fulfils its function precisely because it is such an astonishing mosaic of poetry, story, proverb, historical narrative, occasional epistle, tracts for the times, and the like. It is inexhaustible; no one can master the richness and diversity that characterises its form and content; it is as complicated as life itself; and its value in part lies in the kind of spiritual formation that results from persistent wrestling with its claims.[188]

Abraham concludes his discussion by noting that the Bible "was never meant to stand alone"[189] and must be supplemented by a creed. His reservations about using the Bible with would-be believers are perhaps a reflection of his time: today, there is so little biblical knowledge in the general population that it is necessary to begin with the story. This is a small point of disagreement, however; Abraham's work is extraordinarily helpful in demonstrating why God, not the Church, must be the starting point for faith. His definition of evangelism is sufficiently broad to encompass areas (the cognitive, moral and experiential) properly considered the domain of education. His argument is thus a powerful affirmation of the approach to Christian learning taken by Bible Explorer.

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[185] Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism,* 173.
[186] Tinsley, "Tell it slant", 94.
[187] Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism,* 150.
[188] Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism,* 150.
[189] Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism,* 150.

Bible Explorer and the Possibilities of Story

We live in a world that is dominated by stories:

> We are telling more stories today than at any time in living memory, whether we look at the huge numbers of movies now being produced, or focus on the more homespun productions that can be found in the many traditional story-telling networks that are flourishing all over the Western world… Story is central to the contemporary quest for meaning, in much the same way as abstract analysis was central to the outlook of modernity.[190]

This should be a fruitful time for Christianity, a religion which "began with stories"[191] and invites people to "become a living part of God's story."[192] For a number of reasons, however, this is not the case, particularly in the UK. Andrew Walker suggests that Christians "no longer know what the gospel means"[193] nor do they regard the Bible as "a sacred text"[194]. The Church also lacks confidence in the transformative potential of its founding narratives[195]. At the root of this malaise is the fact that many Christians "have forgotten their own story"[196]. This is certainly true of my own community, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Quakers today have limited knowledge of the Old Testament, which many would consider to be an outdated Bronze Age story, and only 32% of the community regularly read the New Testament[197]. If, as Walker argues, the people of God are called to be both the guardians and the tellers of the story[198], then to forget that story will necessarily involve a loss of identity. Scripture is "a community-forming text"[199] and "the community needs the writings to explain itself"[200]. More than that, the text fulfils both a normative[201] and a corrective[202] function, preventing distortion. "Too much attention to culture distorts the message, and Christianity becomes not inculturated but domesticated."[203] Brueggemann argues that taming the wildness of the text is a perversion of the task of biblical interpretation because it is an

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[190] John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 133.
[191] Drane, *McDonaldization,* 140.
[192] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 17.
[193] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 12.
[194] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 12.
[195] Drane, *McDonaldization,* 140.
[196] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 6.
[197] Ben Pink Dandelion, *Open for Transformation: Being Quaker* (London: Quaker Books, 2014), 43.
[198] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 14.
[199] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 174.
[200] Cragg, "According to the Scriptures", 26.
[201] Drane, *McDonaldization,* 148.
[202] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 190.
[203] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 6.

attempt to fetter the Spirit[204]. Wink, too, stresses the value of the 'otherness' of the text, which he sees as enabling the possibility of human transformation: "we do not listen just for what pleases us. Indeed, we learn to watch for what displeases us, what is most alien to us, since our interest is explicitly in being altered."[205] It is small wonder that, in suffering the "worst case of amnesia the Church has had for a long time"[206], Christianity is in danger of losing its identity, its distinctiveness[207] and its "generative power"[208].

What is it about story as a genre that makes it so significant and so valuable in a Christian context? As we have seen, it reflects the way we make sense of our world today: "story once again has become a primary vehicle for meaning."[209] It is thus a natural point of contact between Christian and secular culture. Sauter and Barton identify a number of other ways in which the concept of 'story' might benefit theology[210]. Firstly, they suggest that the word 'story' is neutral and so may refer to history, biography, legend or fiction, all of which contain truth. Reading biblical texts as narratives brings Christian theology closer to Jewish thinking, where the story of the Exodus, for example, has a central place in theological understanding. Significantly, such a move reflects biblical Hebrew itself, which has no word for fiction; both fact and fiction are seen as vehicles for truth[211]. Terence Copley prefers to use 'narrative' or 'account' in place of 'story', which he considers a babyish term, relating only to what is untrue[212]. This may be the case in children's work, and caution over language might be advisable in the primary school classroom. In biblical studies, however, reading a text as story emphasises its narrative dimension rather than its doctrinal applications[213]. This helps readers to avoid what Brueggemann identifies as "two tyrannies that have long vexed the process of Scripture study[214]". These are the tendency by the Church "to treat the text as a closed package of settled truth"[215] and the academic tyranny of reductionism, which explains

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[204] Walter Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality: What we do when we read the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 28.

[205] Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation,* 55.

[206] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 219.

[207] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 30.

[208] Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality,* 26.

[209] Drane, *McDonaldization,* 140.

[210] Sauter and Barton, "Introduction," in *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (eds. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 3.

[211] Bowness, Brimicombe, Copley and Lane, *Biblos,* 7.

[212] Bowness, Brimicombe, Copley and Lane, *Biblos,* 7.

[213] Sauter and Barton, "Introduction"*,* 3.

[214] Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, 16.

[215] Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality,* 16.

away all that is 'odd' in the text. Story leaves open the question of the supernatural[216], for example. Using similar language to Brueggemann, Walker has also pointed out "a hermeneutical oppression whereby the story – now fragmented and disconnected – has had to await authentication from the critics in order to be told"[217]. The outcome of these tyrannical modes of interpretation is "an innocuous Bible"[218] that is not only dull but lacks transformative energy. In contrast, reading the text as story honours its integrity: "the normal response to a story is to listen to it, not to dissect it"[219]. This is not to denigrate the work of the critic, but rather to stress that a fragmented text is both unreadable and emasculated[220]. Against this, Hauerwas is careful to stress "that calling attention to the narrative character of Christian revelation cannot be a strategy to avoid questions of the truth of that which is revealed"[221]. This is the proper task of theology:

> The job of theology is to expound the story and tell us what the meanings are… Everything is judged on the basis of its agreement and compatibility with the narrative, which is central to Christianity. We should redefine heresy as something that ruins the story and orthodoxy as theology that keeps the story alive and devises new ways of telling it.[222]

Sauter and Barton's final point relates to the fruitfulness of story[223]. They have the field of narrative theology in mind, particularly the work of Stanley Hauerwas. But the value of their insight can be seen in other areas, too: story opens up channels of communication, for example. Armerding notes the ability of story to cross cultural boundaries: "people in all places and at all times relate to story"[224]. Stories thus become a powerful tool for social transformation, used by campaigners such as Dr Martin Luther King[225]; they are also at the heart of interfaith relations[226]. Stories enable us to step into another person's shoes, albeit briefly; our participation is invited not forced, because "it is impossible to tell an audience a story it does not wish to hear"[227]. Drane suggests that stories offer healing because they

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[216] Carl E. Armerding, "Faith and Method in Old Testament Study: Story Exegesis" in *A Pathway into Holy Scripture* (eds. Philip Satterthwaite and David Wright; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 47.
[217] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 51.
[218] Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality,* 18.
[219] Armerding, "Story Exegesis", 46.
[220] Armerding, "Story Exegesis", 47.
[221] Stanley Hauerwas, "Foreword" in *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (eds. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000)*,* vii.
[222] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 183.
[223] Sauter and Barton, "Introduction", 3.
[224] Armerding, "Story Exegesis", 48.
[225] Drane, *McDonaldization,* 144.
[226] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology,* 130-147.
[227] Reynolds Price, *A Palpable God* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 23.

focus on the whole spectrum of human experience and require us to use our imaginations, thereby opening ourselves up to new possibilities[228]. It is this particular ability of stories to unite the intellectual, cognitive and affective dimensions of human life that allows them to "address the spiritual hunger of our day"[229], according to Armerding. Reynolds Price would take this argument further, believing that hearing and telling stories has always been essential to humanity: "we crave nothing less than perfect story"[230]. Throughout history, sacred stories have arisen in direct response to this profound human need[231]. In a culture such as ours, where stories abound, Drane believes that the right question for people to ask is "Of which story do I wish to be a part?"[232]

Drane's question moves us from a consideration of stories in general to a consideration of the Christian story in particular. WTB Ministries operates on the basis that telling this story enables an encounter with God. The theological term 'revelation' directs us to "the modes and the areas – stories, nature: the world as creation – in which we have a well-founded basis for expecting this encounter with God."[233] Graham Ward warns us against confusing the propositional contents of revelation, which are necessarily provisional, with the continuously unfolding process of encounter: "disclosure is an action, not an event – the continuing, generative action of revelation in the temporal and material"[234]. Likewise, it is necessary to remember that God addresses us from beyond ourselves; in the case of story, it is not that God and the narrative are one, but rather "that God reveals himself by telling us new things"[235]. The text witnesses to the revelation; revelation will always come first "and this order is irreversible"[236]. Moreover, "there is no revelation without a human response"[237] and it is this response which gives rise to the biblical text. Inevitably, the text can never exhaust the concept of revelation[238]. Looking at Christian history, it is possible to identify moments when this understanding has been lost: Walker criticises the Protestant reformers,

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[228] Drane, *McDonaldization,* 143.

[229] Armerding, "Story Exegesis", 47.

[230] Price, *A Palpable God,* 14.

[231] Price, *A Palpable God,* 46.

[232] Drane, *McDonaldization,* 148.

[233] Sauter and Barton, "Introduction", 2.

[234] Graham Ward, "Allegoria: Reading as a Spiritual Exercise" in *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (eds. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000)*,* 119-120.

[235] Barton, "Disclosing Human Possibilities: Revelation and Biblical Stories"*,* 60.

[236] Ernstpeter Maurer, "Reading the Bible Theologically" in *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (eds. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000)*,* 74.

[237] Maurer, "Reading the Bible Theologically", 75.

[238] Maurer, "Reading the Bible Theologically", 75.

for example, for making the Bible, rather than God, "the source of all truth"[239]. Pinnock warns us that "the natural tendency is for the multiple and spontaneous expressions of the original story to produce fixed formulas and static concepts"[240]. Such interpretations will be historically and culturally conditioned and thus limited. We will never arrive at "absolute certainty"[241] as to the text's final meaning because the Bible is "a living text that testifies to the living God"[242].

> Scripture resists determinate translation. Biblical texts are not vague; rather, they confront the interpreter with an irreducible plurality of possible readings and translations. This plurality may be described very precisely, provoking a history of interpretation.[243]

The theme of fruitfulness infuses the Christian story because it reflects the abundance and creativity of God[244]. This is a story which "is symphonic and polyphonic"[245]. But there is another dynamic at work here, too: "revelation seeks to be recounted and thus communicated to others.[246]" We see this generative energy at work in the events of the Old Testament, which "are not so much interpreted as lovingly recalled and retold"[247], and in the four Gospels, where the multiple descriptions of events act "as a brake on centralization, on the establishment of a single, absolute meaning"[248]. Every facet of the narrative is valued and heard. Fruitfulness is thus woven into the fabric of the Bible, not only in terms of the text itself and its interpretative outcomes, but also in the "transformative potential of the text as Scripture"[249].

In its own small and specific way, Bible Explorer demonstrates the truth of the possibilities inherent in story. As such, it offers both encouragement and challenge to the wider church community: "it is high time we became less preoccupied with rational certainty and doctrinal precision and more concerned with telling the Christian story with its rich interplay of meanings that speak to all our human needs"[250]. BXers meet many young people who know little or nothing about the biblical stories. A student called Elijah had no idea that his

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[239] Walker, *Telling the Story,* 43.
[240] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 186.
[241] Josipovici, "The Bible: Dialogue and Distance"*,* 136.
[242] Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality,* 26.
[243] Maurer, "Reading the Bible Theologically", 71.
[244] Maurer, "Reading the Bible Theologically"*,* 76.
[245] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 185.
[246] Sauter and Barton, "Introduction", 2.
[247] Josipovici, "The Bible: Dialogue and Distance", 144.
[248] Josipovici, "The Bible: Dialogue and Distance", 152.
[249] Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality,* 128.
[250] Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 184.

namesake was an Old Testament prophet, for example. In a pluralistic society, this is a failure of both education and evangelism.

> Of course, in the act of telling the story, modern theologians cannot make people believe it. What they can do, however, is to stand up for the story, and learn again to tell it in the way it was meant to be told. This means allowing the story to speak for itself. The gospel is not anything we choose, or the bits we enjoy, or those elements that affirm modern sensibility.[251]

BXers can be quietly assured that they are capable of fulfilling this task: the evidence supports it. Nor should they be wary of assuming the title of 'theologian' – as practitioners of 'ordinary theology', it is an accurate nomenclature. Walker laments that "our theological educators are not trained in the art of story"[252]. This matters because Christians may see their narrative as "the story we want to hear over and over again"[253] but their enthusiasm is not widely shared. There can be a tension between congenial storytelling and "drawing people deeper into the Christian master story"[254]. By setting the Bible within an educational framework, BX reduces the risk of it becoming "sheer entertainment"[255]. Although some BXers would value more training and support, all have received at least a basic grounding in story-telling techniques. Nevertheless, Walker is right to stress the importance of "the integrity and intention of the storytellers"[256]. As Astley has demonstrated, a teacher wields great power and influence in the classroom. For a Christian storyteller, the burden is even greater: "ultimately, if we cannot demonstrate the proof of our story by living it, we will never convince people of its truth by talking about it."[257] Given the responsibility laid on Bible Explorer presenters, the provision of more central support and ongoing training would both nurture the volunteers and acknowledge their value to the programme.

Bible Explorer also shows that it is perfectly possible to offer an encounter with God prior to an encounter with the Church. This makes sense in both an educational and an evangelistic setting. It is the fruitfulness of the course, however, which speaks most loudly of the value of story-telling. Children and presenters grow in confidence, learn and enjoy themselves. Alter argues that the biblical writers, too, "took pleasure in exploring the formal and imaginative resources of their fictional medium"[258]; they were thus engaged in "the most

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251 Walker, *Telling the Story,* 53.
252 Walker *Telling the Story,* 87.
253 Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze,* 166.
254 Walker, *Telling the Story,* 67.
255 Walker, *Telling the Story,* 67.
256 Walker, *Telling the Story,* 20.
257 Walker, *Telling the Story,* 201.
258 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 46

serious playfulness"[259]. This combination of play and the profound captures something of the essence of Bible Explorer. Brueggemann describes how the possibility of encountering God in the biblical text enables Christians to live "in joy"[260]. Joy is both a fruit of the Spirit[261] and a required aspect of children's spiritual development in the classroom[262]. "Expressing joy" is also one of the 24 religious values included in the 2007 Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE in Birmingham[263]. Joy reminds us that the focus of education should be "on the total well-being and becoming of the human person"[264]. Perhaps the most appropriate of the fruits of the Spirit for children's work, the joyfulness of BX indicates the programme's success in educational and spiritual terms. Joy, too, ensures the continuation of the programme. It is, perhaps, only a little fanciful to say that "the joy of the Lord is [Bible Explorer's] strength"[265].

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[259] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 46.

[260] Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality,* 29.

[261] Galatians 5:22.

[262] Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education), *School Inspection Handbook: Handbook for Inspecting Schools in England under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended by the Education Act 2011)* 2015, p.35.

[263] http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/content/agreed-syllabus (Accessed 04/04/2015 at 13.23)

[264] Grey, "Feminist images of redemption in education", 225.

[265] Nehemiah 8:10.

APPENDIX 1

Lesson Plan for Bible Explorer Old Testament

Lesson	Aims	Objectives	Content	Method
1. (one hour duration)	To explore the storyline of the Book of Genesis.	Overview the structure & literature of the Bible; introduce the concepts & methods	Creation; fall; flood; nations; geography; Abraham; Ishmael; Isaac; Esau; Jacob; Joseph.	• PowerPoint • Turning the room into a map • Story telling • Key words • Handsigns • Supported by fun/worksheets
2. (one hour duration)	To complete the first 5 books.	Introduction to Judaism: terms, customs & beliefs. Review the material taught.	Slavery; Moses; plagues; Passover; Red Sea; Mt. Sinai; Law; Tabernacle; Levites & Priests; book of Numbers; death of Moses.	• Passover Artefacts • Video • Story telling • Key words • Handsigns • Terms: Pentateuch, Law, Torah, Tenaka, Pesach, 10 Commandments, Patriarchs, Festivals, Rites of Passage.
3. (one hour duration)	To explore the storyline in the books of Joshua, Judges & Ruth	Review the major people, places, events, geographical movements in chronological order	Crossing the Jordan & possessing the land; military strategy; examples of the Judges; story of Ruth.	• Keyword/pictures • Drama including costume • Story telling • Key words • Handsigns • Reviews • Video excerpts
4. (one hour duration)	To extract the storyline from 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles & 5 books of poetry.	Know the names & key themes of the Old Testament books of storyline.	Samuel; United Kingdom: Saul, David, Solomon.	• Question & Answer • Story telling • Role play • Key words • Handsigns • Reviews
5. (one hour duration)	To summarise the message & role of the 17 Prophets. Examine the storyline in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther	The rise, fall and restoration of the Jewish nation, spanning 500 years of history. Recall the whole Old Testament in 77 steps.	Divided Kingdom; Scattering of Israel by Assyrians; Exile in Babylonia; Return of Zerubbabel, Ezra, & Nehemiah; Christ	• Props • Rap • Re-enactment of Purim • Flash cards • Story telling • Key words • Handsigns • Reviews • Final chronological review with key words and actions.

Lesson Plan for Bible Explorer New Testament

Lesson	Aims	Objectives	Content
1.	Explore the start of the life of Christ & the geography of the Gospels.	Overview the structure & literature of the New Testament. To discover the different gospel styles. Introduce the concepts & methods.	Bethlehem-Birth. Nazareth-carpenter. Jordan-baptised by John. Wilderness-tempted by Satan. Exploring temptations.
2.	Explore the middle of Jesus life, especially his teachings.	Introduction to different people Jesus met & His teachings. Review the material taught.	Jerusalem-Second Birth. Sychar-Woman at the well. Nazareth-Rejection. Capernaum-Disciples, Sermon on Mount, Power, Parables, Miracles, Peter, Transfiguration
3.	Explore the final part of Jesus' life on earth.	Review the major people places, events, geographical movements in chronological order	Jerusalem Perea-teaching Judea-actions Triumphal entry. Temple Cleansing. Last supper. Gethsemane. Trials. Crucifixion & Resurrection
4.	Explore the storyline from book of Acts	Explore the birth of the Church & transitional changes.	Ascension. Spirit. Persecution. Philip. Paul. Peter.
5.	Explore the missionary journeys & writings of Paul.	To complete the New Testament storyline. Recall the whole New Testament in 32 steps.	The 3 missionary journeys. Jerusalem Council. Trials. 1st & 2nd Imprisonment & Expansion

APPENDIX 2

Bible Explorer Interview Questions

1) **The children's response to Bible Explorer**

How do the children respond to the programme? Is there any material which the children regularly find difficult and, if so, what is it? Which stories do they know?

2) **Textual Issues**

How do the children respond to issues of gender? How do you approach the violence in some stories, especially in the Old Testament? Which stories do you leave out and why? How closely do you keep to the biblical text when telling a story?

3) **Practical considerations**

Is BX included in your local SACRE curriculum? Which schools book BX and why? Which schools refuse the programme and why? How do you approach inter-faith issues in the classroom? To what extent do you see your role as that of an evangelist?

4) **The presenter's response to the programme**

How does BX compare with other children's programmes you use as part of your Christian ministry? What do you enjoy most about teaching Bible Explorer? What made you become a BX presenter? Is there anything you find particularly difficult or challenging about teaching BX? What keeps you working in schools? Could you describe any personal benefits you have noticed as a result of presenting BX? What do you think schools might gain from Bible Explorer?

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