

TEACH^R

A decade of Encounter Biblical Studies

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Abstract

Starting with a brief history of the development of the Encounter Bible curriculum and summary of the evaluative research methodology, this paper draws on teacher, student and administrator interview data in its account of teachers' attempts to teach Encounter Bible. The writers refer to selected points of interest from their evaluation as they discuss teacher perceptions of the Encounter resource, assessment practice, the theory behind planning, the teaching and learning process, spirituality in schools and classrooms, and professional development. They also review student perceptions of teaching, and administrator involvement in supporting teachers. In surveying teacher achievements and challenges, the paper addresses a limited number of key issues that could ultimately be of critical reflective importance for Christian schools.

Introduction

Although research suggests that teaching Bible or religious studies in a Christian school is a rewarding task, it also suggests that it has become increasingly challenging for a raft of important reasons (Luetz et

al, 2018). This paper draws on data from a national qualitative evaluation of the Encounter Bible teaching program in the Australian Adventist school system. The discussion refers to selected points of interest from that evaluation and addresses a limited number of key issues that could ultimately be of critical reflective importance for other Christian school systems.

From reasoning to response: Systemic realisation of need

There came a point in time relatively early in this century when the Adventist school systems in Australia and New Zealand became convinced that a more current and engaging Bible curriculum was needed to meet the spiritual and learning needs of a changing group of learners. Further, teachers were thought to need more resources and up to date theoretical and practical support to meet these needs. The result was the launch of a major development by Adventist Schools Australia (hereafter abbreviated ASA) of the Adventist Encounter Bible curriculum.

Established in 2008, the Australia and New Zealand Encounter Committee oversaw the conceptual development, writing, professional development and implementation of the Adventist Encounter Curriculum in both countries. Committee members wrote the first units, but the authorship soon shifted to teachers who had participated in writers' workshops, placing the ownership with those responsible for implementing it. Some external

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writers were employed to keep the project on target. By the end of 2014, the full suite of units for kindergarten to Year 10 was complete. Professional development workshops and online training accompanied the rollout of units in the early years of implementation. Today, the Adventist Identity Officer is responsible for continually reviewing units and evaluating resources.

This outline of events indicates that ASA and Adventist Schools New Zealand (ASNZ), have together invested substantial resources in developing the Encounter curriculum over an extended period of time. To the credit of the developers and implementers of Encounter, the resources flowing from this development program have been well received by most teachers. In fact most have manifested much good will towards ASA and ASNZ, and shown commitment in receiving, implementing and supporting the roll out of Encounter. Further, Encounter's conceptual framework and wealth of resources have been discovered and deemed desirable by other school systems in the Adventist world. Consequently in the last 5 years the Encounter program has been introduced to Adventist schools in North America, Canada, Inter-America, England, and South East Asia.

Listening to the stakeholders

After a decade of Encounter's implementation, and in a quest for transparency, accountability, and continual improvement, ASA decided to facilitate an independent review of how well Encounter was being implemented. This review would investigate the perceptions of students, teachers and other school personnel.

The authors of this article were engaged to conduct this review.

Sampling and the review methodology

Interview respondents and schools were selected through "purposeful sampling" (Quinn-Patton, 2002). This method is characteristic of qualitative research, in that respondents are chosen for directed reasons so deeper data can be collected. Overall, fourteen schools supporting twelve primary and ten secondary campuses were selected as data sources across the ASA system.

Data were drawn from a 'focus group' interview approach involving students, teachers and administrators, and occasionally chaplains and parents. Between October 2017 and October 2018 45 groups of students from Years 3 to 10, and 27 groups of available Bible teachers who taught those years were interviewed. We also gathered data through in-situ field notes and summaries of interviews, unsolicited written submissions, peer

debriefing, discussions between researchers, 'crystallization' interviews with a small set of former teachers, Encounter developers and administrators, and constant referral to the recordings of interviews.

While the interview questions formed the basis of this inquiry and were utilised in each setting, they were not set in sequential concrete. As qualitative researchers, the "smart bomb" approach was also employed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 193) in that interesting or idiosyncratic responses from respondents were explored in-depth, and once concluded, the interview returned to the flow and sequence of questions.

The intent of this paper

The following discussion is limited by two caveats. Firstly, although this paper draws on much data and discussion from the evaluation of how well Encounter Bible is being implemented, it is not a summary of that evaluation. The original review including its major recommendations was written for ASA system leaders and decision-makers to be used for system improvement. However, following the writing concept of "audience purpose and text," this paper is aimed at providing teachers with a spectrum of possibilities and areas that could be considered when teaching Bible. Also, there is a need for teacher and administrator stakeholders in the Encounter curriculum process to receive some feedback about interesting patterns in the data. This is particularly important for those involved with interviews in schools.

Secondly, the original evaluation process was underpinned by the ideology that it should be aiming at 'collaborative growth' (Bakken 2018). Hence, the following discussion in this paper aims at developing "collective visioning" (Bakken 2018 p. 65) so that teachers can reflectively consider the points raised and design ongoing Bible-based programs suitable for their context of culture and situation. As a consequence, this paper does not contain an introductory literature review since one finding of our research was that teachers need to take more responsibility for understanding their own personal and collective perspectives and positions.

Teacher and student perspectives of Encounter

The paper is structured around a set of questions, each intended to help focus the thinking of readers and prompt discussion of associated issues.

The curriculum resource

Question: What did teachers think of the Encounter curriculum resource?

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This question is important because teacher perceptions of the quality of resources help indicate how well they feel supported. And obviously good resources help teachers perform better. After interviewing all teacher groups, we concluded that the great majority of teachers appreciate the content and arrangement of the curriculum ASA has provided. Consequently, we wrote in our report:

Consensus is that the system has a valuable resource that provides a significant step up from what it had before. Because of its unifying thematic structure, implementation of supportive instructional practice, involvement of many teachers in its sustained writing program, consistent approach to developing spirituality and faith, and other qualities, Encounter has earned widespread systemic teacher appreciation and support. It has done much to demonstrate good teaching practice and strengthen the impact of Bible in Adventist schools in the last decade.

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However, as with any aspect of an evaluation process, a range of teacher perceptions about the resource were fielded, ranging from positive to negative. Typical positive teacher comments were: “I think it’s a fantastic portal where you can share soul and journey with slight modification,” and “I love Encounter. Our struggle is to choose units.” Then there were comments like “I give it a big tick, although it does have some serious shortcomings,” or “It’s a good road map, but we have had to update the resources as we go, and modify it to school ethos,” and more negative comments like “You get lost doing surface stuff,” or “It’s a trap to have too much.”

One indicator of Encounter’s perceived usefulness is its pattern of usage. The large majority of schools in our sample were committed to using Encounter. However, there were exceptions. One larger primary teacher group had made little use of Encounter, another had changed it dramatically to suit the school’s context, and two others, while being supportive, expressed frustrations about perceived issues with the resource.

Although teachers appreciated their wealth of Encounter resources, issues emerged from their attempts to tap into this wealth. The discussion below is not exhaustive.

One of ASA’s key aims was to provide teachers with plenty of teaching material to choose from. Ironically many primary teachers in particular felt overwhelmed by the wealth of content, especially on first meeting the new curriculum, and hence found their lesson preparation unduly time consuming. Also because of the broad array of teaching activities presented, many also felt bogged down trying to teach it all. Secondary teachers rarely reported having issues with the wealth of content.

Secondly, Encounter’s usefulness and applicability for children not of the Seventh-day Adventist faith appears to be a major issue for many teachers and schools, as many teachers think that Encounter appears to be written for Adventists. This view is partly because some Biblical issues found in successive units need to have sufficient context in earlier units for the content of the later units to make sense. As one primary teacher found “When going back for non-SDA’s you really need time to unpack it, but they don’t get time to dwell on it.” We noted that this issue negatively affected more primary teachers than secondary, and yet a number of teachers from both teacher groups seemed to take it in their stride.

Thirdly, there was a desire in some schools for more content to address the plethora of current life issues confronting pre-adolescents and adolescents.

Fourthly, some teachers, particularly primary teachers, wanted to feel more ‘permission’ or latitude to add, subtract and change content, activities, assessment tasks and unit timeframes to suit their situation, experience and teaching style.

A fifth issue was that themes within and between some curriculum units and sections were seen by a significant minority of senior teachers as being somewhat fragmented, not suitably aligned with the flow of Scripture, or lacking critical detail that should reflect more of the actual ‘warts and all’ record of the Bible.

Finally, a number of primary teachers wanted to see still more Bible stories than Encounter had presented and felt that there could be more use of the Bible in classes. That state of affairs seems ironical, given Encounter’s strong affirmation of Scripture.

After recording these data and interviewing ASA curriculum developers and school leaders, it was noted that a number of “myths” about ASA expectations seem to have crept into the system and manifest themselves in teacher misconceptions. No matter how thorough the in-service schedules or communication processes have been, miscommunication still happens in systems.

Assessment

Question: How did teachers perceive assessment?

Assessment is part of the Encounter curriculum resource, but because of its importance, we have discussed it as a separate issue. After reading through Encounter units and interviewing a curriculum developer the researchers felt that Encounter units have provided a good range of useful assessment tasks and exemplars. Nevertheless, in their interviews, many teachers expressed a wish for

more guidance on how to assess.

The developers of Encounter did not want the curriculum to be primarily information or assessment driven. Instead, they looked for a paradigm shift to make student connection with God a key goal of the program. The data shows that this decision may have had some flow-on effect on teacher attitudes to assessment practice. There was, in fact, widespread division of opinion regarding how Encounter should be assessed.

There is much variation in systemic assessment practice. Some teachers do not assess at all, while others set assessment tasks that can take substantial class time. For the majority who want some form of assessment, there is debate about whether they should use comments, self-assessment, work folios, grades, all of these, or other methods besides.

There was also debate about whether there should be any assessment of the spiritual and faith domains. If the purpose of Encounter is to embark on a spiritual journey and encounter Jesus, teachers question where assessment fits. As both staff and students have often stated, “Can something so subjective be assessed?” This question provides the biggest and most divisive assessment issue for Encounter, so the researchers feel that further clarifying statements about the intent of assessment in the teacher materials would be beneficial.

The theory – Transformational Planning Framework

Question: How were teachers using the Transformational Planning Framework?

The Transformational Planning Framework (Cobbin, 2011) outlined the process of starting with a “Spiritual Growth Model” (Maxson, 2006) and developing it into an eight-part framework. The eight-stage learning model was designed to allow students to:

be emotionally engaged; see the big picture; respond with depth, rigour and creativity; be touched at heart level; personally reflect; intentionally worship; develop an authentic connection with God; be challenged by an obedient response; share meaningfully; and truly celebrate who God is. (p. 11).

In Australia there is wide variation in how well the framework has been applied in schools. Teacher data led us to estimate that less than twenty per cent of teachers attempt to faithfully follow the framework cycle in teaching, while less than ten per cent of them affirm its use strongly and apply it consistently. A typical affirmative statement from a primary teacher in this teacher minority was: “Love it, good. You have different thought processes, you can take it to

heart, can leave bits, kids love Kaizen.” Similarly, a secondary teacher thought: “The wheel is very helpful, focused, not too complex, great, particularly the bait part.”

Around fifty per cent of teachers say they appreciate and understand the framework reasonably well, and see it as having some use, often because it at least helps to give some shape to their teaching. Many of these teachers use selected elements to suit their purposes. A frequent kind of comment from this group was: “The framework has some sense. I definitely use it, but I pick and choose.”

About thirty per cent of teachers reported making no attempt to directly follow the framework while planning. As one primary teacher said: “The time-fit is hard so I don’t look at the framework.” A number of teacher groups also suggested specific ways to simplify the framework. For example, a minority think that it could be collapsed from eight to four parts.

Various issues such as time pressure, perceived complexity of the framework, teacher skill or personality, or the perception that heart and soul learning can be too “touchy-feely,” “emotional” or “girly” appeared to lessen the effective application of the framework. Hence the latter parts of the learning cycle often received less attention than the introductory parts.

After interviewing teachers, the researchers questioned whether the framework’s usage pattern reflected any shortcomings in the Encounter implementation process, model design, teacher inadequacy, all of the above, or something else.

The researchers felt that the number and arrangement of the elements of the framework collectively challenged a number of teachers. Not only does the framework attempt to encompass some complexity of cognitive learning, but also the additional demands of social-emotional learning and both spiritual and faith development. To the researchers it seemed that the amalgamation of the learning and faith development processes in one model was laudable on one hand, yet ambitious on the other.

To its credit, ASA did attempt to trial the model and set up a teacher feedback process. The researchers wonder if teachers think that in hindsight the system may have benefited from inviting more trialling, more staffing to assist the developers, a longer timeframe and more rigorous process of review involving more feedback loops, more “negative case analysis” (Quinn-Patton 2002) pursuit of systemic consensus, and teacher development than occurred. This discussion highlights the challenges any school system meets when attempting to implement a major curriculum initiative.

Clearly many teachers seem quite content to

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modify their use of the framework, to choose parts that suit them, or to use it mainly as a guide for good teaching practice. Further, in light of student feedback and our observations, many appear to be teaching quite well despite not following the framework closely. The authors believe that in future, some discussions during staff development sessions could centre on matters such as the benefits of theory for improving spiritual classroom practice, the limits of teaching models, and the qualities needed to make a learning model work well.

The teaching and learning process

Question: How well are teachers teaching?

The bottom line in any curriculum evaluation is that teachers want to know how well they are teaching. That is why the researchers wrote a short report for each school visited, reporting largely on how students perceived their teachers and the Encounter lessons. We can say that Encounter has resulted in the implementation of a good variety of teaching strategies and activities, more so in primary than secondary campuses. Among other methods, teachers have used stories, group work, discussions, video analysis, acting and skits, written stories and diaries, use of practical props, service activities, debates, Bible study skills, research, and art work. As one primary teacher reported: “Teaching strategies are great. A lot of lessons, group work, engaging. You really can’t do 3 units in a term.” Overall, it appeared to us that the pedagogical approach advocated in Encounter was supported by reference to credible literature and has helped facilitate systemic classroom practice that often ranges between good and very good.

Because the researchers did not see classroom lessons, they used student perceptions as an indirect indicator of teaching competence and adherence to the spirit of Encounter. Student responses indicated that they have generally enjoyed their Encounter classes. Primary student reports of this enjoyment on a 1-10 scale were high, and ratings generally ranged around 8 out of 10 or higher. Secondary group ratings were a little lower, but student estimates still averaged at least 7 out of 10 in terms of enjoyment. Naturally, more significant fluctuations in ratings depended on the teachers and classes involved. For example, in a few lively Year 8-10 groups, it was possible for some in the group to rate Bible at 2, 3, or 4 for enjoyment!

Besides students’ numerical ratings, their comments show that teachers using the Encounter resource are achieving a ‘power of good’ in schools. For example, Years 3-4 students said things

like “Really like it,” “Fun,” “Helps me learn how connected we are to Jesus.” Years 5-6 comments included “Absolutely helps me, helps me think about my purpose in life,” “It has changed my life,” and “Bible is a really good start to the day.” Two Years 7-8 comments were “In the last topic, the 10 Bridesmaids, it really really reassures me that He is coming back,” and “I enjoy Encounter mainly ‘cause in that class I get to express my identity.” And one Year 10 student reflected on Year 8, saying “In year 8 we learned how God led in our lives. Bible lifted the weight off my shoulders and put me at ease. It made me curious. Maybe this whole God thing is real. Maybe there is something bigger. I love the understanding of God.”

However, it became apparent that some teachers are attempting to teach Encounter in a predictable “traditional” way. A number of students complained about boring repetition of the same stories, repetition that was not iterative and deepening in meaning over successive years. Students also cited too much mindless note taking and written work, lack of variety in learning activities, the perception that Bible is a time to switch off, insufficient group and class discussion of issues impacting students, or limited opportunity to ask questions. Students especially wanted more hands-on activities, service-learning opportunities, inquiry-based approaches, discussion and group work.

This desire was heightened by the enrolment in schools of varying numbers of unchurched or Christians from diverse denominations, whose presence was distracting, and appeared to stress the instructional capacity of numerous teachers. Interestingly, the structure and philosophy of Encounter were intended to depart from the style of traditionalist teaching that some students complained about.

Another theme emerging from student interviews in five of the schools from Year 5-6 upwards was the desire for more engagement with learning, a process that included opportunities to ask questions and lead out in class, suggest content or help organize learning. Two comments from Year 8 students were: “We wouldn’t mind if we could take over the class one day and preach about something,” and “We rarely get to speak about what we think.”

Several groups of teachers agreed with this student perception and commented that they thought Encounter was not sufficiently student-centred, further it did not allow well enough for newer pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning. Though Encounter was designed to incorporate student inquiry, there was some thought emerging from teacher interviews that any future revisions of Encounter could still embrace

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a more constructivist learning style that better accommodates student research, inquiry, project-based learning, and other types of learning like STEM.

There is always a gap between curriculum intent and variable teacher ability. Student interviews provided a collage of perceptions of the ideal teacher. Students wanted teachers who can stimulate them by varying their teaching methods, and who are passionate, authentic, fun, friendly, emotionally warm, engaged, open-minded, enthusiastic, well informed, interested in student issues, and consultative. This sounds rather like a rather ambitious wish list. Teacher attitude, vision, spirituality, personality and ability, all substantially moderate the learning process. As one administrator declared: “It’s the teacher, not the program.” This comment was one among many of similar sentiment from all respondent groups. In the words of a secondary teacher: “The content resources are great, but if it lacks soul or heart that goes with it, it doesn’t work. It needs passionate teachers.”

Spirituality in classrooms

Question: How well does Encounter assist the development of faith and spirituality in classrooms?

There is evidence that the teaching of spirituality by using the Maxson (2006) model and other resources is working reasonably well in schools. Teacher consensus was that Encounter is a helpful resource for facilitating student encounters with God and other people, one that lends itself well to engaging students spiritually.

Numerous teacher accounts revealed how spirituality is made manifest in Encounter classrooms. For example, teachers felt connected to God while teaching Encounter. One primary teacher observed: “We teach it and it does change us”, and a secondary teacher reflected: “It gives me a very connected feel to God, even when I teach it.” Others found that applying the heart and soul elements of the learning framework cycle assisted spiritual learning. Still, others found spirituality particularly present in classes when teaching units such as the crucifixion story, when taking class worship, or using their class to run a chapel.

Some teachers saw spirituality most obviously present through prayer experiences in classes and worship, and particularly when teaching a unit on prayer. Others prayed over desks and rooms as evidence of their conviction of the power of prayer or spoke of praying for opportunities to promote spirituality in conversations with students.

A minority of teachers, mostly secondary, were rather cautious about reporting how Encounter develops student spirituality. They thought that although they saw spiritual engagement happening in Encounter classes, it was hard to tangibly identify it and develop it. One said, “the idea is good, but it’s hard to do it.” For these teachers, spirituality is something that they do not presume to perceive or develop easily. In general, despite some articulate teacher responses, some teachers could have demonstrated more awareness of how to foster student spiritual sensitivity and awareness. In summary, the human spiritual development field appears to be a fruitful element for ASA to work on going forward.

In their group interviews, students were asked to define spirituality, to explain how Encounter helps them think about their lives, and to reflect on how they know God is with them. They entered into discussion willingly, and in keeping with their year levels, responded with insight. For example, when asked what spirituality was, they offered responses like “Relate to God, Jesus” or “Connection with God and relation to Him.” In summary, most students of all ages showed some fundamental awareness of what it means to be personally spiritual and experience God’s presence.

Despite students’ interesting and encouraging responses, we did note that about twenty-five per cent of them, particularly in lower grades, floundered in trying to say anything about what it meant to be spiritual. And students at all levels sometimes experienced some difficulty in explaining how Encounter was helping them think about their behaviour and life, an area that corresponds with the ‘Gospel’ and ‘Lordship’ elements of Maxson’s model.

Writers of Encounter define spirituality as “movement of the entire life towards God.” (Cobbin 2010, p. 72), a view congruent with Ofsted’s (2004) perspective. However, as Adams et al. (2016) point out, schools will better nurture spirituality in their students if they have a clear understanding of these terms. Consequently, we think it would be worthwhile for teachers to at least explore the overlap and differences between the meaning of faith and spirituality.

Unlike the work of Fowler (1995), Westahoff III (1976) and Gillespie (1988), Maxson’s model does not directly address students’ developmental stages of faith or spirituality. However, it does encourage teachers to reflect on spiritual development as complex and multi-faceted, occurring in different ways for different people as they make sense of experience (Roehlkepartian et al., 2006). The reviewers wonder how much teachers have been aware of the developmental aspects of faith, and

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whether such awareness would impact their teaching.

Along with the many positives, there are spiritual issues for the Australian system to address. Examples include the negative influence of disruptive student minorities, and time pressure brought about by teachers attempting to cover too much material.

School spiritual ethos

Question: Is the spiritual impact of Encounter being carried into school ethos and life?

School administrators and teachers support Encounter and see it as being an essential element of the broader spiritual ethos of their schools. However, there is some variation in how well they perceive its integration into the spiritual life of schools. While it is operating in all schools, in many cases it tends to be siloed and not deliberately connected with broader school life.

Despite this siloing, many teachers could see Encounter's presence in school ethos. Typical expressions from this group were: "Yes it spills over into the school program," "Learning and applying Bible stories happens in the playground," "Bible integrates beautifully with English, art, drama," "Encounter is part of the whole, and the effect is greater than the sum of its parts." In schools where Encounter is perceived to be an essential and integrated core of the religious program, it takes on a more vibrant feel. Indeed, it is clear that when Encounter becomes a component of a more holistic spiritual framework, there is a higher degree of engagement by students.

In the last third of our data collecting activity, students were asked to rate the overall spirituality of their school. Their ratings were very positive, usually ranging between 8 and 10. In our discussions two points became clear. The first was that schools were deliberately creating good social-emotional warmth, acceptance and spirituality in their ethos. Secondly students were focused much more on the actual people and relationships in schools than on the spiritual or faith facets pursued in class lessons. While this perception can be seen as positive, when student minorities disrupted classroom lessons or avoided singing in chapels, these actions pulled the school's spiritual rating down in the estimation of Adventist students.

As part of school ethos, chaplains are not always involved with Encounter within SDA schools. Teachers often commented that their school could "dovetail better with chaplains." However, although chaplains' activities can be siloed from the teacher's role in some schools more than others, chaplains are still widely appreciated by staff and students.

Encounter is also perceived as more relevant when it is a core part of the chaplain's role. The authors contend that teachers think there could be more ongoing dialogue between themselves and chaplains in schools.

Administrator involvement with Encounter

Question: How well have administrators assisted the implementation of Encounter?

One of the objectives of this study was to ascertain administrator awareness of Encounter's efficacy in their school. While responses revealed a continuum of awareness, the researchers felt that administrators, in general, needed to engage more with this essential curriculum element. Typical responses were: "I know Encounter is here, but I don't know enough about it," "We could be more deliberate how we implement it," "There's been no review for a long time," or "It needs to be led and driven harder than it is." These responses showed some willingness to self-evaluate and realign personal impact.

In general, teachers appreciated their principals for providing strong spiritual leadership. In expressing their vision, these leaders frequently mentioned their motivation to make school values visible, and to reach out to churches, parents and community. Administration teams were also successfully creating a warm and spiritually nurturing social-emotional climate in their schools, which was tangible during data collection visits.

There were specific areas where principals could be more proactive in implementing Encounter. For example, three out of the ten secondary schools we visited had no Bible Head of Department. Some principals seemed unaware of the unequal distribution of resources. Others appeared to be unfamiliar with the silo effect of Encounter in the curriculum, or relatively unaware of the quality of the connection between teachers and chaplains. So far, there has been little monitoring or appraisal of teaching within schools, and little initiation of school-based professional development. ASA may consider providing more professional development for administrators to help them become more aware of how to orchestrate the interconnection of various elements of school spirituality and faith, including Encounter, into a coherent ethos.

Professional Development

Question: Have teachers been adequately supported in their need for professional development.

“*it tends to be siloed ... [un]connected with broader school life ... administrators ... needed to engage more with this essential curriculum element.*”

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Initially formal professional development (PD) provided by ASA for teaching Encounter appeared to involve three components. Firstly, as a partner of ASA, Avondale University College helped to prepare both primary and secondary undergraduate teachers to teach Encounter. However, this move did not benefit all students equally. One teacher said “I did a unit at College, but it went well over my head. I can see the benefit now.” Secondly, some PD was offered at various Conference teacher meetings. Thirdly ASA consultants circulated around schools.

As the curriculum was rolled out, some teachers were involved in the unit writing cycle. These teachers rated the writing process as a very positive professional development experience, even though it was not planned to be direct PD. Some of these senior teachers are still in schools to help less experienced teachers.

Teacher interview data have pointed to several ‘gaps’ in the PD strategy. For example, a few teachers perceived that teacher professional development sessions sometimes covered only the Adventist philosophical perspective of education but not specifically tips for teaching Encounter. Several felt that these sessions were “perfunctory.” Other teachers missed some or all of these presentations and all training depending on when they joined the staff or whether they attended Avondale University College.

While some teachers could not recall any PD since about 2012, others appreciated the effort made by the ASA Encounter team to provide practical teacher PD. It was particularly noted that in the three years prior to 2019, ASA had lent their presenters to the USA to roll out the Encounter program in that country. This generous gesture has meant that in those years ASA PD virtually dried up in Australia.

Finally, it was encouraging to the review team that some teachers expressed a desire for more development in the social-emotional, relational, and spiritual aspects of teaching. One said “We need more PD on how to experience Christ, on how to be spiritual,” and another had the view that “Something more important is this relationship thing. We need some kind of training in relation building.”

Two aspects of PD in particular are worth noting for discussion. Firstly, it appears that schools could assume more responsibility for PD and share the burden more with ASA. Given the diversity of Adventist schools, an “action research” or other mode of on-site school professional development could be considered. Secondly, both ASA schools and system administration will need to weigh up how to divide resources between PD and curriculum development. As several teacher groups observed, ASA “money went into curriculum development and

not the equivalent into training.” Some administrators also weighed in on this issue, saying things like: “Teachers are not prepared enough. We have spent millions on curriculum but not teacher training.”

Where to next?

As previously indicated, Encounter has served Adventist schools well. Teachers generally think it is a valuable learning resource that has supported them well and done much to promote both good Bible teaching and learning in Adventist schools. As shown in the data, it has been mostly well received and supported by teachers and administrators. Hopefully teacher awareness and discussion of some of the issues identified in this paper will help strengthen Encounter as it moves into its second decade.

During our research the question continually arose as to whether Encounter should be reviewed or changed. Encounter’s longevity possibly spoke to its strong initial foundation, and that it had in fact outlived other contemporary curricula implementations. On the other hand, in the last decade there have been ‘seismic’ shifts in the Australian context that have made the review timely. There has been a major change in the student population of Adventist schools to include a higher percentage of other faiths, rapid developments in research relating to both learning and spirituality, and major social and technological changes in society.

Being mindful of these impacts prompting educational change, the reviewers found that while there were a large number of teachers who either made no comment, or who believed that Encounter was satisfactory or better as it stands, there were a corresponding number who believed that it needed to be revised and changed in light of current trends in both the Adventist system and the wider Australian education system. ASA administration’s immediate response to the evaluation signified that Encounter would be reviewed. **TEACH**

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“*Something more important is this relationship thing. We need some kind of training in relation building*”

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