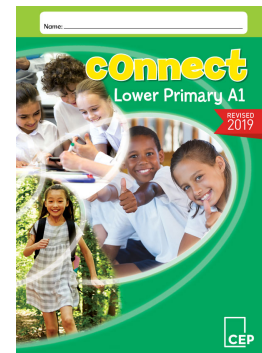


Curriculum Review – *Connect A1*

Published by *Christian Education Publications* ©2019 ISBN number 978-1-925879-02- Reviewed July 2020. Version 1. RI Curricula are referred to by the Department of Education Qld as RI Program Materials.

Executive Summary

In 2019, the Multi-Faiths RI Peak Body Network commissioned an independent review of common curriculum materials used by Religious Instructors in Queensland Schools. The focus of the review was to assist Principals to be confident that curriculum materials comply with Department of Education Queensland policy requirements. This report is a review of the curriculum materials used by many Christian Religious Instructors, against 15 policy areas of focus. The review purpose and process is outlined in a separate document on the website multifaithsri.org.au.



<https://www.cepstore.com.au/IdaProductQAYW?id=01t0K000005mwfMQAQ>

Outcome:

Connect is highly compliant with Department of Education Queensland policy.

There are two themes, each with ten lessons; Knowing God our Creator, and Trusting God. The lessons are organised around important people from the Bible, and the lessons that can be learned from their lives. There are 3 instructor manuals for different age groups, each with lessons organised around the same idea and bible concept. The 3 manuals enable the instructor to choose activities that are appropriate for the ages and interests of their groups, and easily differentiate for student needs.

There are quality colour magazines for students with engaging activities aligned to each lesson. The instructor manual provides support for community members who may not be teachers to confidently organise themselves, and engage with students and schools in respectful and sensitive ways.

There are a few lessons or activities in the *2019* edition where an instructor would need to exercise caution. For example:

1. The curriculum relies heavily on visual aids. While there is cultural diversity in the photograph of children on the covers of the student magazines, this diversity is not evident in the curriculum illustrations.
2. Instructors of RI need to use language that is sensitive to students' needs, backgrounds and experiences, especially when teaching bible stories with historical references to cultural groups as enemies of God's people.
3. Each lesson of the curriculum contains a lot of content, which is meant to be tailored by each instructor for their specific class prior to teaching. However, there is little guidance given to instructor to help manage time well.

A lesson-by-lesson analysis and details about any areas of concern and recommendations are provided in this report to support RI instructors in complying with Department of Education policy.

Reviewer:

Dr. Jill Willis, Associate Professor of Education,
Queensland University of Technology,
July, 2020.

Curriculum details

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Connect A1

Connect A1 is a one-year program for instructors. It is published by Christian Education Publications that is affiliated with the Youthworks Media, which is linked to the Sydney Anglican Diocese.

Instructor's manual with detailed instructions

- 219 pages for the Infants, 214 pages for the Lower Primary, 204 pages for the Upper Primary.
- There are two themes, each of 10 lessons. The first is organised around knowing God, and the second theme of trusting God.
- There are 3 versions of each curriculum published in separate instructor's manuals and student booklets. The lessons are organised around the same idea and bible concept for all ages. These enable the instructor to choose activities that are appropriate for the ages and interests of their groups.
 1. Infants
 2. Lower primary
 3. Upper primary
- Each one page lesson plan contains information for the instructor about
 1. Lesson aim
 2. Lesson outcomes
 3. Memory verse
 4. Bible Background
 5. List of resources
 6. Teacher's prayer
 7. Ideas for warm up called "way in"
 8. Bible focus with scripted teaching sections and links to visual aids.
 9. Connections to activities that link to activities that invite students to make connections including extension ideas.
 10. Teacher reflections.

Student Magazines

- Quality colour magazines for students include engaging activities aligned to each lesson.
- The magazines have activities that are highly visual and include joining the dots, drawing illustrations, completing mazes, and solving puzzles. Song lyrics are included.

Lesson by Lesson Review

- Reviewed as compliant.
- Reviewers noted that while these activities are compliant, RI instructors would need to take additional care with these activities.
- Reviewers indicated that caution should be exercised and that this lesson or part of the lesson may cause compliance concerns.

- Sections of this lesson were not compliant.
- N/A Not applicable.
- * Updates in new edition have addressed the issues raised.

Unit	1										2									
Lesson	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1. Appropriate age and lesson time																				
2. Supporting a cooperative arrangement. No leaving of materials																				
3. No proselytizing or promotion of outside school activities and publications																				
4. No activities or content that would cause harm to a child (physical, psychological or emotional well-being)							LP							LP						
5. Supports and promotes a safe, supportive and disciplined learning environment																				
6. Responds to diverse learning needs – level and age	UP						UP													
7a. A safe physical and cyber learning environment - supports wellbeing																				
7b. Fosters behavioural strengths																				
7c. Builds positive relationships (peers, staff, parents, community) and promotes positive social interactions															UP					
7d, e. Encourages inclusivity, diversity															LP		UP		LP UP	
8. Safe supportive environment, free from bullying, discrimination, harassment																				
9. Responsive to school behaviour plan, safe supportive and disciplined learning environment																				
10. Smart choices - healthy food and drink		i													LP					
11. Consistent with Code of School Behaviour																				
12. Risk - suggests undertaking an assessment and identifies where risk assessment is needed																				
13. Promotes responsible care and use of animals																				
14. Does not include activities using items that may cause allergic reactions																				
15. Supports effective communication between students, parents communities that is inclusive and valued																				

The codes refer to the Infants manual (i), Lower Primary (LP), and Upper Primary (UP).

Review Commentary

Strengths

- 1. The instructor handbook is detailed and well designed.** The lessons are clearly outlined with scripted suggestions for instructors, that are in clear and child-friendly language.
- 2. The instructor handbook provides practical advice to support community representatives in their roles.**

Guidelines in each lesson, and at the end of the instructor manual give advice on how to be inclusive, and respectful of students and the school. The expectations that instructors should undertake training, and also refrain from adding unauthorized lessons into the materials is clearly outlined (p. 7). The lesson plans also give advice to instructors about how to teach with sensitivity, including advice to

- Exercise sensitivity in their choice of language (p.202);
- Familiarise themselves with specific school policy (p.199);
- Be inclusive of diverse cultural backgrounds of students within the RI classroom (p.198).

- 3. The lessons have a variety of interactive learning activities.**
 - a. The upper primary curriculum materials advocate for a number of positive values including environmental sustainability (lesson 3), social inclusion (lesson 8), caring for the vulnerable (lessons 14 and 15), forgiveness (lessons 9 and 16), and a special emphasis on valuing each person's sense of worth and self-esteem.
 - b. A number of different teaching strategies are suggested to elicit student engagement and interaction, such as using visual aids, songs, puppets, drama, crafts, invisible writing, and real-life case studies.
 - c. Mostly uses age appropriate language for students to explain biblical stories and implications.
 - d. There are sensitive depictions of important bible concepts like the crucifixion (lesson 9).
 - e. Each lesson contains numerous options for the teacher to select from depending on the diversity of each class. The activities and resources are aligned with age appropriate material.
 - f. Lesson plans are clearly scaffolded. All lessons are planned for an indoor classroom with no specialist equipment needed. The usual resources that children would have and regularly use in their classrooms are used such as glue, scissors, pencils, crayons. They are low risk.

Cautions

- 4. Representations of cultural diversity will need to be approached with sensitivity.**
 - a. Teachers of RI need to use language that is sensitive to students' needs, backgrounds and experiences. Lesson 15 depicts the Syrian army as being the enemy of God's people (p.132). This may be emotionally insensitive to some students from Syrian backgrounds.
 - b. Lesson 19 depicts the Persia as a powerful empire ruling over God's people in 480BC. While this may be factually true, its inclusion may cause students with a Persian background to feel distress or unease. In the lower primary lesson the girl, Esther, is described as being taken during a raid for the Syrian army. Specifically, p.145 states, "One day, when the Syrian troops were raiding Israel, they took an Israelite girl to be a servant of Naaman's wife." This could be distressing for students, particularly as this was not called out to be unjust behaviour by a king. The narrative relies on the importance of the servant girl being an Israelite, so could be reworded e.g. "the servant girl of Naaman's wife was an Israelite...".
 - c. The curriculum relies heavily on visual aids. While there is cultural diversity in the photograph of children on the covers of the student magazines, this diversity is not evident in the curriculum illustrations.
- 5. Instructor sensitivity when including historical representations of gender.**
 - a. Instructors should consider of the depiction of women in lessons, especially in lesson 14, 15, and 19, and how they are represented in the narratives as being in positions of less power e.g. not able to own land, not able to take care of themselves without the assistance of a

male relative, and needed to be summoned by the King before being allowed to speak. Lesson 19 mentions "King of Persia" (p.177) who "ordered that all the beautiful young women in his empire be brought to the palace so that he could choose a queen. It was a bit like a beauty contest...King Xerxes loved Esther but he was a very busy man. Queen Esther could not even come and speak with the king unless she was invited. She had to wait for the king to hold out his royal sceptre before she could speak. If anyone did not do as the king asked, there would be consequences..." Children's emotional and social wellbeing would be better served if King Xerxes is more accurately described as a King who did not rule his kingdom justly or treat people kindly.

6. Lesson timing will need careful consideration

- a. Each lesson of the curriculum contains a lot of content, which is meant to be tailored by each instructor for their specific class prior to teaching. However, there is little guidance given to instructors to help manage time well.

7. Activities related to food need to be reconsidered.

- a. Some suggested activities include references to food like using a packet of M & Ms and Smarties (Infants Teacher Manual, p. 36 – lesson 2) and students making bread or pasta (Lower Primary Teacher Manual, p. 140 – lesson 14). Some of these foods would not be compliant with the Safe Foods policy, or suitable for students with allergies.

8. Caution in references to outside activities.

- a. There is a phrase in the back of the instructor manuals suggesting that if students would like to know more about the gospel, the instructor may "inform students about church activities in their local community. They might like to ask their parents/caregivers to contact you for more information". Instructors would need to be aware that they are not to promote religious and denominational activities organised outside of school.

Recommendations for instructors:

1. Contextualise the Old Testament stories within their historical settings and discuss how the values may compare to modern society. Perhaps specific mentions of Persia could be left out, e.g. A powerful kingdom at the time of 480BC.
2. Become informed about the cultural backgrounds and practices of students within the school. Highlight that where there are cultural differences, people can misunderstand and judge others. Highlight that Jesus didn't judge others by their cultural differences.
3. Instructors using this curriculum need to be consider time management in the classroom and make choices from the suggested activities to suit the available lesson time.

Recommendations for publishers:

1. Add illustrations reflecting the diversity of student cultures and abilities in the student workbooks.
2. While there is a lot of helpful information for instructors about being supportive and inclusive, the section entitled "Help with classroom management" (p. 191) could be updated to reflect more appropriate ways of discussing and guiding children's behaviour. Terms such as "misbehaviour" or "misbehave" should be replaced with less emotionally charged language such as disruptive or off-task behaviour. Point to actions instructors can take like seeking feedback on their own practices, and consulting with others who know the child well.

Considerations

- a. **Lesson 1** contains the statement "The bible is a book of facts. There is no fiction in it..." p. 14. The bible contains many different types of writing, such as poems, narratives, parables, and letters – not just factual statements, so this could be confusing for students.
- b. Throughout the curriculum, there are places where there are assumptions of pre-existing biblical knowledge. More specifically, terminology referring to people groups such as "Israelite, Jew, Jewish and Persians" are not explained to the children in the curriculum. Additionally, depictions of "God's people" and "God's enemies", particularly in relation to the use of language that is still utilised to describe existing nation states and the backgrounds of people groups around the world needs to reflect and facilitate inclusive and not divisive practices.

- c. **Lesson 7** describes a flood. Instructors need to be sensitive to students who may have experienced trauma as a result of natural disasters. Lesson 7 mentions the flood as “a consequence of God acting to address all the wrong that was happening in Noah’s time” (p.61). Children may misunderstand their own or others’ experience of natural disasters as being the direct judgement of God. Similarly, lessons involving miraculous healings need to be contextualised (e.g. lesson 15) so that students are not being encouraged to equate “expecting acts of miraculous healing” with “having faith in God”.

Recommendations for instructors:

- a) Introduce any biblical concepts and words each lesson.
- b) Explain that it can be hard to understand why some horrible things such as floods happen and avoid children forming the misconception that all natural disasters as an act of judgement from God.

Policy Compliance

The curriculum materials are highly compliant with the 15 policy areas of focus identified in collaboration with the Department of Education policy advisors, drawn from:

- The Education (General Provisions) Act 2006.
- The Department of Education’s Safe, Supportive and Disciplined School Environment Procedure
- P-12 curriculum, assessment and reporting framework
- Student Learning and Wellbeing Framework
- Inclusive Education Policy
- Statement of expectations for a disciplined school environment
- Smart choices - healthy food and drink supply strategy for Queensland schools
- The Code of School Behaviour
- Managing Risks in School Curriculum Activities
- Animal Use in Queensland state schools
- Smart choices - healthy food and drink supply strategy for Queensland schools
- Parent and Community Engagement framework

The curriculum materials offered many opportunities for students to consider issues and develop values that are identified as desirable educational goals within the Australian curriculum. Some of the strengths of the curriculum in helping students develop as responsible, caring and global citizens are outlined. The activities that were noted as considerations are flagged as blue in table 1, while activities requiring some greater caution have been noted with an orange flag and are explained in detail. These cautions could be addressed by the publishers in future editions, and easily adapted by instructors to ensure current policy compliance.

Chapter 5 - Section 76 of the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 requires that materials are for Year 1 students or older ages. While the Connect A1 manual does have lessons for kindergarten ages 4-6 these lesson materials may support Year 1 instructors to differentiate their activities. They would not necessarily imply that RI classes would be conducted with Prep students.

Overall Comment from the review team:

Connect A1 is a well considered resource that aims to provide clear scaffolding and appropriate pedagogies for non-trained teachers (ie instructors who are volunteers in school classrooms). The lessons are appropriate for primary-school children. The lessons provided ample opportunities for all children to get involved and contribute through discussions, reflections and activities.