

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
IN AUSTRALIAN
CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

The authors offer a diverse and compelling analysis of religious education, addressing current trends and future challenges in curriculum, leadership, and pastoral practices. Teachers will find enriching ideas in Scripture, spirituality, ecology, early childhood, and social justice. Administrators will appreciate the thoughtful treatment and discussion of school families who do not attend Sunday Mass, the attrition and retention of school-level religious education leaders, and the ongoing need for enhancing Catholic identity.

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The continuing role of Catholic education within secularizing, or by now largely secularized, societies raises critical theological, political, and educational questions throughout the West. Catholic schools exist, indeed, at the very coalface of the New Evangelization. Rymarz and Belmonte's rich and wide-ranging collection of reflections on, and case-studies of, Catholic RE provision in Australia offers much for those in other contexts - myself included - to think about and learn from.

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This book brings great insight, and opportunity for deep reflection on practice and purpose, to anyone working in the world of Catholic Religious Education.

COLIN MACLEOD

EDITED BY RICHARD RYMARZ AND ANGELO BELMONTE

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
IN AUSTRALIAN
CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**
Exploring the Landscape



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Introduction

Angelo Belmonte and Richard Rymarz

Religious education has been a key part of the life of Catholic Schools in Australia since their inception. As we are well into the second century of this history, it is timely to reflect on our current practice and to begin to address, more explicitly, some of the issues that challenge religious educators going into the future.

The genesis of this book was in a conversation between us after many years of collaboration and writing. On this occasion, Richard mentioned that several times while at the University of Alberta, a number of Australians had approached him asking about where in North America they could encounter 'cutting edge' RE. After some reflection, his conclusion was that much of the best thinking and praxis about religious education in Catholic schools was to be found in Australia. This is not to demean the efforts of religious educators in Canada, the United States and other places. Rather it recognises the significant commitment in this country, over a considerable length of time, to provide quality religious education. In light of this a book that gathered some of the most prominent people working in religious education seemed a good way of capturing some of the commitment. It was also an opportunity to provide in one volume a type of a showcase of work done. Thus religious education in Australian Catholic schools was born!

This book then has two foci. Firstly, it presents religious education in an explicitly Australian context. It recognises that what is done in this country represents a significant and ongoing contribution that arises from a particular cultural context. The history of Catholic education in this country highlights the importance that the Australian church has given to providing a quality education that has as its foundation an explicit religious identity. In maintaining this identity religious education has a preeminent role. Think for a moment of the amount of time devoted to religious education

in Australian Catholic schools. This is a marker of the quantity of effort in this endeavor. Hopefully this book highlights also the quality of some of the work. A second focus of the book is that it is on religious education in Catholic schools. Religious education in this context brings with it specific assumptions and a range of expectations. This is what gives it its particular style and emphasis. It is a reflection of the discipline as it is conveyed through the prism of Catholic beliefs, values and worldview. This is something we celebrate and it comes with recognition that the field is not static but develops in unison with the changing social context.

Even in our lifetime we can readily recall the movements in the field. Some of these changes have been structural where, for example, we witnessed the transition from religious education being taught by professed religious to lay teachers. Angelo recalls being taught in his early years through a question and answer approach by Sister Celsus. A Mercy nun dressed in a modified habit made popular following Vatican II, Sister Celsus would take students through the Green Catechism question by question with the view to successfully navigate to an external and very public examination by the diocesan school inspector. It is worth noting how prepared we were for an unexpected and unscheduled visit from Fr Delaney!

There were also changes in underlying theology and pedagogy. Richard recalls the halcyon days of experiential catechesis. Who can forget class after class entering the room and to be told time and time again that the lesson was devoted to class discussion of topics that were seen as being relevant to the development of our faith? Funny thing is he cannot remember what many of these topics were. If we now move forward to our professional lives, both of us have been heavily involved in developing religious

education curriculum over several decades. These include being part of movements towards incorporated overarching guidelines to developing more content driven religious education with the aid of specially developed textbooks.

This book is a panorama of religious education in Australian Catholic schools. It seeks to be this through both a broad and narrow focus. The first part of the book looks at some key conceptual issues. The second part takes on a particular focus on the curriculum. There is no one approach to religious education in Australian Catholic schools, and in recognizing this diversity we have set out to provide a critical overview of the field.

We thank all the contributors and look forward to ongoing collaboration which has as its goal maintaining and improving the quality of religious education in Catholic schools. We are privileged to produce a book with chapters from such well credentialed figures. At the same time, we are both very aware that often the most significant voice in Catholic education is somewhat hidden. And that is the voice of the classroom RE teacher. She is the person who on a daily basis encounters students and is charged with the responsibility of delivery of religious education curriculum which in the context of Catholic schools is centred on a proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the person of Jesus Christ. Her contribution is invaluable. And it is to her that this book is dedicated.

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Part One: Setting the Framework

SAMPLE

Chapter 1

A Personal, Critical
Perspective on the
Development of
Australian Catholic
School Religious
Education: Where
to From Here?

Graham Rossiter

This chapter reflects on my decades of involvement with religious education in Australian Catholic schools. It does not reprise or summarise work already done that interpreted the historical development of Australian Catholic school religious education.¹ Rather the focus is on how two particular aspects have changed, and on some implications for the future. The two areas of change are:

1. How religion teachers managed their dual commitments to the church and to the personal development of their students.
2. Change in the key words used to explain the normative purposes of religious education (RE).

How religion teachers understood their dual commitments to the church and to the personal development of their students

The history noted above showed that in the 1960s, as a result of significant socio-cultural change, educational change and changes in the Catholic Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, there was a period of uncertainty and some confusion in Catholic school RE. The old ways of the green catechism, Bible history and apologetics were no longer felt to be relevant, but it was not clear just which new direction should be taken. But one thing was quite evident: religion teachers worked hard trying to make RE more relevant and meaningful for students. To this day, commitment to promoting the personal development of young people and to trying to continually improve the relevance of RE has never been lacking in Catholic school religion teachers.

In the 1960s, the RE teachers were almost all members of religious orders. They had committed their lives to the service of the church,

so no one could question their commitment to its welfare or to the promotion of its mission. Nevertheless, these same teachers never saw RE as an exclusively ecclesiastical activity. They hoped that RE would educate students well in the Catholic faith tradition and hopefully too, this might leave them favourably disposed towards a long term engagement with the church; but these hopes were held in creative tension with efforts to help young people make sense of life, and to negotiate the perils of adolescence in what was becoming a more complex and challenging culture. These dual commitments were so strong, so embedded and held in creative tension, that they were often taken for granted and not articulated as they have been here. In my experience of that period, I never met a religion teacher who thought that getting the students to Sunday mass was the central aim of RE – even though there were some vocal groups like Catholics Concerned for the Faith who felt that faulty RE was responsible for declining mass attendance. Religion teachers thought that good RE would benefit young people whether or not they chose to be regular churchgoers.

At this same time, following new government funding arrangements for private schools and the gradual development of diocesan Catholic Education Offices, there was not a strong exercise of church control over the religion curricula in Catholic schools. There were Catholic doctrinal syllabuses, but the religious order schools were in effect free to develop their own religion curricula. This was also a vogue period for SBCD – School Based Curriculum Development – and this was often the only sort of religion curriculum in operation. So both schools and religion teachers had freedom to experiment. With this freedom and given the period of rapid change, there was much trial and error in RE. Also the religion teachers in the 1960s and 1970s often had little in the way of professional learning in scripture and theology. One

significant development in Australian Catholic school RE at this stage was the Communitarian retreat (Rossiter, 2016).

A crucial lesson to be learned from this history is that healthy Catholic school RE needs to retain a creative tension between ecclesiastical concerns and teachers' views about the spiritual/moral needs of pupils. Where there is no creative tension, and where ecclesiastical purposes predominate, RE could more readily be perceived as if it were just 'telling students about Catholicism'. There is a tendency for ecclesiastical interests in RE to be concerned with promoting engagement with the church and regular mass attendance; and from the teachers and students' points of view, this focus appears somewhat unrealistic and not so relevant to young people's lives. Naturally, ecclesiastical expectations of RE will be conservative. In the sense of conserving and handing on the religious tradition, these are valuable, justified purposes. But if this perspective is so prominent to the extent of eclipsing other more personal-development and educational purposes, then RE runs the risk of being perceived increasingly as irrelevant.

By the 1990s, a general consensus emerged about what might be best described as a 'subject-oriented' approach in RE. This meant that religion was treated as a core learning area in the school curriculum, aspiring to be as challenging as any other learning area, with content and pedagogy that did not suffer by comparison with what was being done in other subjects. This included all the protocols and procedures of the established academic subjects/learning areas – with a normative curriculum, objectives, performance indicators, varied student-centred pedagogies and appropriate assessment and reporting. In many Catholic secondary schools, RE in Years 11-12 consisted of a state board-determined course in Religion Studies (or Studies of

Religion) which had the same academic status as subjects that counted towards tertiary entrance scores.

For many religion teachers, subject-oriented RE was about educating pupils religiously and spiritually – it was an educational exploration of religion and not necessarily a religious experience as such. There still remains, however, some variation in the views of teachers about how devotional and religious the activity should be. This ambiguity is also related to language problems in RE to be discussed later. At the same time RE was acquiring more academic status and respectability in the school curriculum, this development was being affected by an increasing tendency to regard it as more an ecclesiastical activity than an educational one. I believe that this tendency runs counter to the academic and core educational character of RE. Also, the more centralised and fixed the religion curriculum, the less freedom there was for adapting RE to meet contemporary needs.

My conclusion: There is an urgent need to restore the creative tension between educational and ecclesiastical concerns. This is needed above all to promote the relevance of RE as an academic subject for students – but also to promote research, creativity, and innovation in RE. It is pertinent to note that the academic study and research related to RE at tertiary level (in Catholic and other institutions) is a crucial reference point for maintaining a creative tension between educational and ecclesiastical concerns. Tertiary religious education has usually always had academic freedom giving it the independence needed to explore and appraise insights from education and the social sciences, as well as from theology and religious studies.

The language for Australian Catholic school religious education

Within the discourse of Catholic schooling, the use of ecclesiastical words has tended to eclipse, and create ambiguity about, the fundamental term *religious education*. The frequent use of words like faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, catechesis, new evangelisation, mission and ministry to encompass RE tends to make the unrealistic presumption that what happens to pupils psychologically during religion lessons will change their faith and religious practice. And what gets neglected is a realistic understanding of what it means to *educate* them spiritually and morally. This latter purpose is one that RE can actually achieve quite well – but efforts to enhance pupils’ religious knowledge do not automatically generate personal faith. Also, a successful, meaningful, and relevant RE cannot adequately be appraised in terms of traditional religiosity performance indicators like Sunday mass attendance.

Through different metaphors and perspectives, the ecclesiastical terms noted above can nuance the understanding of RE from the church’s point of view. But there is also a downside – too many normative constructs can constrain thinking and can stifle freedom and creativity, as well as create confusion about fundamental purposes. The problems for RE posed by ecclesiastical language were identified as early as 1970 by Gabriel Moran in the article *Catechetics RIP*. They are even more prominent today. Religion teachers readily recognise the problems when they are discussed in postgraduate RE programs, and the ambiguity both they and parents see in the ecclesiastical terms is evident in research findings (e.g. Finn, 2011). But this is an issue yet to be acknowledged and addressed in Australian Catholic schooling.

Attention will now be given to the evolution in the use of normative ecclesiastical terms in Catholic church documents. But it is important initially to note that the succession of Roman documents dating from the second Vatican Council have been more generally concerned with the church's broad Ministry of Catechesis and the Ministry of the Word. Religious education across age groups, and more specifically RE in schools, was only part of the wide scope of those documents. But they have often been read by educators as if everything applied to the school context. By contrast, the documents from the Congregation for Catholic Education – especially *The Catholic School* (1977) and *The Religious Dimension of Education in Catholic Schools* (1988) – were more focused on the Catholic school and RE.

This evolution is evident in the percentage frequencies of key words that have been used in a selection of authoritative documents that have been applied to religious education.

The Vatican II 1966 document *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE, Declaration on Christian Education) focused mainly on the word *education* (66%). This emphasis was both expansive and ecumenical in scope. It was naturally open to dialogue with other Christian denominations where 'Christian education' was prominent. This also articulated with the wider, international discourse of education, showing how education within a particular religious tradition and 'educating one's faith' could make a valuable contribution to people's spiritual and moral development, as well as to civic education.

Key words that have been applied to religious education as % of total key words per document

Documents	Length in words	Faith	Education	Catechesis	Evangelisation	Development	Formation	Identity	Mission Ministry Witness
1966 Vatican II Declaration on Christian Education	5K	11%	66%	1%	0	8%	6%	0	8%
1970 Renewal of Education of Faith (Australian)	47K	40%	14%	23%	0	4%	2%	0	18%
1971 General Catechetical Directory	31K	30%	4%	40%	2%	2%	6%	0	15%
1988 Religious Dimension of Education in Catholic schools	19K	23%	36%	3%	4%	7%	13%	1%	14%
1997 General Directory of Catechesis	69K	25%	6%	49%	0	1%	9%	0.5%	11%
2007 Catholic Schools at a Crossroads (NSW/ACT Bishops)	4K	21%	29%	7%	12%	2%	8%	6%	15%

Table 1. Analysis of the frequency of words that have been used to refer to religious education

In 1970, the Italian and Australian bishops in a sense ‘jumped the gun’ in publishing their post-Vatican II directories (*The Renewal of the Education of Faith*, REF) before the Roman *General Catechetical Directory* (GCD) was issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in 1971. The idea of educating people’s faith was carried through from the Vatican document, while catechesis (23%) became more prominent – it was used only once in the Vatican II document.

A sharp decline in the use of the word ‘education’ was evident in the Roman GCD (1971). From roughly 70% prominence in the Vatican

II document, education was virtually replaced by a 70% usage of 'catechesis' and 'faith'. This naturally inhibited ecumenical links with those outside Catholicism who used the words 'education' and 'Christian education'. From then on, the discussion of RE from a normative Roman Catholic perspective tended to become 'in-house' and not as open to wider educational discourse because it was more or less locked in to a set of ecclesiastical constructs that had little currency outside the Catholic church. This also meant that the RE endeavour was understood and talked about more as if it were an ecclesiastical activity. The more ecclesiastical, and correspondingly the less educational, it was perceived to be, RE became increasingly insecure in the Catholic school curriculum. If it was not regarded primarily as education, in all likelihood this would eventually have negative consequences in terms of the perceptions of teachers, students and parents. However, to be fair to the GCD, it was never intended to be a document about RE, but rather the wider religious ministry of the Catholic church for faithful of all ages in a variety of contexts.

As might have been expected, the Roman Congregation for Catholic Education's 1988 document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (RDECS), as also its earlier document *The Catholic School*, 1977, gave special attention to the word 'education' – consistent with the emphasis in the Vatican II document. These documents helped raise the status of RE in the Catholic school curriculum, noting that it was distinct from catechesis. From the church perspective, both catechesis and religious education were needed, and RE was 'at home' in the school.

The Roman document *The General Directory of Catechesis* (GDC) was a 1997 rewrite of the 1971 GCD. It too was concerned with the church's ministry of the Word and not just education in Catholic

schools. The word frequencies for both documents were similar. While not as prominent as the other ecclesiastical constructs, the words 'mission', 'ministry' and 'witness' were used in all six documents. They showed a church mission perspective on activities. Religion/religious was common through the documents – used 200 times in the GDC and 10 times in GE. Theology/theological was less common – 21 and 18 times in REF and GCD, and not at all in GDC and CR – it was used twice in GE.

The 2007 Australian document (NSW & ACT) (CR) used education four times more frequently than catechesis. In addition, it is the first of the documents to use the specific words 'faith formation' and 'Catholic identity'. While 'forming/formation', 'develop/development' and 'identity' (to a lesser extent) were used in the earlier documents, the precise words 'Catholic identity' appeared only once (in the 1997 Roman document), and 'faith formation' not at all. Somewhat surprisingly, the term 'faith development' does not appear in any of the six documents; it did, however, come to have great prominence in Australian Catholic RE circles after the publication of John Westerhoff's *Will our Children have Faith?* (1976) and James Fowler's *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* (1981). (See also Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, ch 18).

What is a feature of the 2007 *Crossroads* document, which contrasts with the focus on education in the Vatican II document, is the way that RE was treated primarily as an ecclesiastical process. Coupled with this assumption was a concern that, despite the high level of resources invested in Catholic schools, they were not successful in inclining young Catholics to become regular churchgoers. Because of low church participation rates amongst Australian Catholic youth, it was considered that there

must be a crisis of Catholic identity in Catholic schools. New evangelisation and strengthening Catholic identity were proposed as principal strategies for 'reigniting' young people's spirituality and improving their engagement with the Church. Increased Sunday mass attendance was listed as a performance indicator for Catholic schools. This author contests these views, considering that there is no crisis of identity in Australian Catholic schools, and that there are no causal links between Catholic schooling/religious education and the ultimate mass attendance rates of Catholic school graduates. RE is about educating young people religiously in their own tradition as well as helping them find a more meaningful view of life in a complex and confusing culture. This is primarily an educational task and not an ecclesiastical one; and Catholic schools are capable of doing this well. But no matter what the quality of school RE, this cannot make the church more meaningful and attractive to young people - only the church itself can do this. While there is evidence of a widespread crisis in the Catholic church, this cannot be said of Catholic schools in Australia, which are thriving (Rossiter, 2010A, 2013). This chapter is ultimately about helping to make Catholic school RE more meaningful and relevant for pupils. Making the church more relevant is of great concern for Catholics, but it has a different and extensive agenda to be addressed, and school religious education has little if anything to do with that.

Special attention will now be given to the use of the term 'faith formation'. In 1987, one priest Diocesan Director of Catholic schools said 'What we need is faith formation and not religious education'. Then and subsequently I found that those who used the term rarely if ever defined what they meant. It appeared to be used with the connotation that somehow faith formation was more important and influential than religious education - as

if the intention to *form* faith made the activity more effective in changing the quality of the individual's personal relationship with God. Education was apparently considered inferior to formation. No indication was given about how an observer could look at activities and clearly see why one was faith formation and others were 'merely' religious education. Also apparent in the connotation was its focus on recruitment to regular mass attendance; this seemed to be the criterion of faith formation that 'works'. This language trend devalues religious education and distracts from giving attention to what it means to educate young people religiously.

Faith formation has etymological roots in the use of the words 'houses of formation' in first half twentieth century religious order practice in Australia (and elsewhere). Formation was like a 'religious Marine boot camp'. The emphases were: conformity, 'marching in formation', uniformity, obedience, being moulded and changed personally according to a desired model. Faith formation tends to become something of an oxymoron when this connotation is associated with a comprehensive view of Christian faith as a committed personal relationship with God, and as a gift from God freely accepted. On the other hand, education today tends to connote being informed, critical thinking and personal autonomy. It may be that fear of such potential could foster a negative view of RE and a more positive valuation of faith formation because it seemed to better serve ecclesiastical purposes.

Faith formation tends to be used more with reference to voluntary religious ministry programs than with reference to formal RE. But its increasing prominence in schools is now eclipsing RE and this will in turn devalue its place in the school curriculum and its status as a challenging academic subject. A division

between 'educational' and 'faith formation/faith development' aspects of the school's overall religious education can make a useful distinction but it uses the wrong language to do so. It makes long term outcomes, or more accurately 'hopes', take the place of the main process word. It gives an impression that the educational engagement with religion in the classroom does not contribute to the development of the individual's personal faith – and this is not the case. The classroom study of religion can make a vital contribution to the understanding and deepening of the individual's faith. This would be the one aspect of the overall development of an individual's faith that is most in tune with what schools do best – educate.

The points made above are also pertinent to interpreting problems with the use of the other ecclesiastical terms 'faith development' and 'Catholic identity', as discussed elsewhere (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Rossiter, 2013). What surprises me in the new focus on Catholic identity is an absence of substantial ideas about what it means to *educate young people in identity* – this is a topic that is in my opinion a crucial one for RE. A corollary to the problems considered above is the emergence of new religious leadership positions in Catholic schools. Originally there was the Religious Education Coordinator (REC) or Assistant Principal Religious Education (APRE). Now there is a variety of positions with names like: Director of Catholic Identity, Dean of Mission, Coordinator of Mission and Catholic identity, Director of Evangelisation, Faith Development Coordinator. Anecdotal evidence suggests that apart from changing the language patterns, this development has had no appreciable impact on the quality of RE and pastoral care in Catholic schools. This is an issue that merits investigation through research. It must be noted that these comments are about language and new leadership roles and not about any evaluation

of the Enhancing Catholic Schools Identity Project that has been conducted in Catholic schools across the country, and especially in Victoria.

The same problems with ecclesiastical language for school RE have affected the academic discipline of RE in Catholic tertiary institutions. Where it has become more ecclesiastical, and less academic and research oriented, it is weakened as an academic discipline. And this in turn has negative repercussions within school RE. Religious education at tertiary level should be a 'lighthouse' for academic freedom and independence both for its scholars as well as for the educators who engage with scholarship in their professional development studies.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the light of discussions with Catholic school religion teachers in postgraduate programs over the years, I know that the conclusions and recommendations will be acknowledged as important and in need of further consideration and debate. I also know that not all will agree with the interpretation and some will find the conclusions challenging because they do not sit comfortably with the status quo or because they conflict with the views of authorities. My confidence in the views expressed here is based on practitioners' judgment that they are *realistic*, and as such they could be tested by research.

It appears to me that the biggest problem facing RE in Australian Catholic schools today is the perception that it is essentially an *ecclesiastical* rather than an *educational* activity. It needs to be thought of, talked about, appraised and developed more as *education* and not judged in terms of how it promotes pupils' church practice. This would hopefully restore the creative

tension between the ecclesiastical and educational concerns that operated just after Vatican II – this does not mean returning to the same practice of those times. I consider that this will be the best trajectory for the students and also for the church.

Final comments are organised under 3 headings.

***Building up the critical dimension in the RE curriculum:
Trying to address the needs of contemporary young people
to help them chart a constructive path through the maze of
contemporary culture.***

The complexities and ambiguities of culture today both promote human wellbeing as well as causing harm, leaving casualties in their wake. RE is well placed in the Catholic school curriculum to help young people look critically at the shaping influence of culture on people's beliefs and values. Also it can study the importance of religions in contemporary discourse and world affairs. It is no longer adequate or relevant to spend practically all the RE curriculum time studying Catholicism. Adding elements of a critical approach, especially from Year 9 onwards, dealing with a selection of contemporary life issues (personal, social, political, environmental etc.) can help young people 'interrogate' their cultural conditioning to discern both the healthy and unhealthy influences. A student-centred, research-oriented pedagogy can empower the students to develop critical skills in studying important issues in an academic way. Such an approach helps resource their basic human spirituality and can help them better negotiate the complexities of contemporary life and find a more meaningful and satisfying pathway – whether they are formally religious or not. This approach needs more prominence in the secondary RE curriculum, complementing the important need for

young people to study their own religious tradition in an academic way – together with some reference to other religious traditions (Rossiter, 2010B).

Taking into account the religious disposition of the students and their perceptions of RE.

Religious educators need a good understanding of contemporary youth spirituality as a starting point for seeing how RE might enhance spirituality. In addition, the relatively secular spirituality of most students in Catholic schools needs to be acknowledged and addressed in other than a 'deficit' way (Rossiter, 2011). It helps to note recent statistics.

Data from the National Catholic Education Commission (2012) and from the National Church Life Surveys (Dixon, 2013) show that in 2012, there were 734 thousand students in 1706 Australian Catholic schools. 71% (522,000) were Catholic and 29% (212,000) were not Catholic. Of the Catholic students, the surveys suggest that by the time they reach their twenties less than 7% will be regular church goers – that is 37,000. This means that overall just under 700 of the 734 thousand pupils will not be Sunday mass attenders. While there was an overall increase in the total number of Catholic students by 1000 over the years 2006-2012, in the same period the numbers of non-Catholic students increased by 46,000.

In the light of this data, there is an apparent discontinuity between the assumptions within Catholic school RE (as if all students are or should be regular mass attenders) and the classroom reality. Catholic RE documentation showed little or no acknowledgement that most Catholic students are not (or will not be) churchgoing. If many of the pupils are not going to reference their personal spirituality to regular church attendance, then this makes it more

relevant to attend to the proposal above that increased attention to a critical approach is needed to help resource their spirituality. Whether students have a religious or a secular spirituality, the crucial thing for Catholic schools is whether they are *well-educated spiritually and religiously*.

In tune with the general indifference to religion in secularised Western countries, most of the pupils in Catholic schools do not care much for RE. They do not see it as a subject that 'counts', and while not antagonistic, they do not engage in RE in the same way they do in subjects like English, Maths and Science (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). There are no formulae that can change such perceptions significantly; but anything that increases the academic status, as well as perceived relevance, will help. I think that the inward-looking focus of asserting Catholic identity in RE exacerbates the problem; it is like 'RE through a *selfie*', where the constant reference to Catholic identity skews the perceptions. The emphasis should be more outward-looking – simply on developing the *education* dimension to RE. Having a rationale for RE in words that explain how it helps *educate* young people is more likely to win the approval and moral support of students and parents, as well as teachers, than does a rationale that appears to be just about replicating Catholicism.

Some may not want to acknowledge the reality here, but the more the word 'Catholic' is used the more the activity is perceived as irrelevant. This is a principal reason why I think that the current emphasis on Catholic identity is counterproductive – it is not the label that RE really needs. For example, there appears to be further decline in the academic status of Catholic school RE as evident in the perceptions of *Catholic Studies* in some NSW secondary schools. It is a Board-endorsed study but does not

'count' for tertiary entrance scores like regular subjects including *Studies of Religion*. *Catholic Studies* is often chosen by students (when religion is compulsory but there are options) who want the least interference in their secular studies. It may be taught with the understanding that there are no assignments or homework with a short open book exam at the end of the year, while the teachers may feel that they can do anything to keep the students reasonably occupied whether the syllabus is covered or not.

Simplifying the language of religious education and exercising leadership in Australian education

The confusing ecclesiastical terms noted above need to be phased out and only used where their meanings are clearly defined. In practice, they tend to carry ill-defined and unrealistic assumptions about religious starting points, goals and processes and this adds unwanted ambiguity and complications to the discussion. It would be more fruitful to redirect the discourse towards how best to educate young people theologically, in scripture, in personal identity development, and in critical interpretation and evaluation of the shaping influence of culture. In the long run I think this change of focus would also be more successful in disposing students towards the ecclesiastical hopes for Catholic schooling.

This change in focus and language is not only more meaningful and relevant for Catholics, it makes the RE discourse more accessible to the Australian educational community; it also readily articulates with educational and psychological research. Otherwise, the discourse remains narrowly and idiosyncratically Catholic. This change is also important because Australian Catholic schools are in effect semi-state schools funded by state and federal governments; they are therefore accountable to the

civic community and need to show how they are contributing to the common good (Bryck et al. 1993; Conroy, 1999). Such a rationale is better suited to justifying continued state funding.

Educating young people spiritually and religiously from within a base of their own religious tradition makes a valuable contribution to the education of young Australians. This exercises a leadership role in Australian education showing that a well-rounded schooling needs a subject area that deals directly with the spiritual and moral dimensions to life. As the school system that maintains the largest commitment to religious education in terms of teachers, curriculum and teacher professional development, Catholic schools can demonstrate how a commitment to this dimension of education might take shape.

NOTES

1. See the 7 references: Buchanan, Hamilton, Ryan, Rossiter, 1981, 1999, Rummery, and Lovat.

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