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Engaging Religious Plurality within Australian and New Zealand Catholic Schools

Particularity in Dialogue with Diversity

Edited by
William Sultmann, Peta Goldburg and David Hall

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Editorial

Engaging Religious Plurality Within Australian and New Zealand Catholic Schools: Particularity in Dialogue with Diversity

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1. Introduction

Catholic schools in Australia and New Zealand educate young people within a context of unprecedented social, cultural, and religious diversity. The shifting religious demographics of both nations, the rise of student agency, curriculum preferencing, and the imperatives of inclusion and wellbeing have caused Catholic educators to reconsider the purposes, practices, and pedagogies of Religious Education (RE). This volume brings together twelve contributions originally published as individual contributions within a Special Issue of *Religions*. This integrated work now brings together these papers and sheds light on the evolving landscape of RE, offering conceptual insight, empirical research, practical guidance, and emerging innovations to support Catholic schools as they engage with plurality while remaining faithful to mission.

The collection responds to a central question: *How might Catholic schools sustain a distinctive religious identity while authentically engaging the diverse beliefs, cultures, and experiences of their students?* Across these chapters, the contributors explore this question through the lenses of curriculum, pedagogy, dialogue, formation, policy, and contextual realities in both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The result is a coherent, forward-facing account of contemporary RE, one marked by openness, creativity, and fidelity.

2. Reimagining Mission and Meaning in a Plural Context

The volume opens with Anthony Cleary's *Truth, Beauty and Goodness: Dialogue with the Divine*, which frames the challenge of mission in a context where Catholic schools welcome students of many traditions. Cleary argues that RE must reclaim its deepest purpose: mediating an encounter with truth, beauty, and goodness. Rather than being diminished by pluralism, Catholic identity can be enriched through meaningful dialogue, aesthetic sensitivity, and an approach to RE that transcends mere instruction. His chapter sets a theological and philosophical tone for the collection, foregrounding the inextricable relationship between mission and pedagogical renewal.

The theme of context shaping mission is further developed in Paul Sharkey's *Faith Inside an Immanent Frame*. Drawing on Charles Taylor, Sharkey examines the lived reality of faith within a culture often characterised by secularity and pragmatism. He considers how leaders and teachers might navigate the tensions between the transcendent claims of the Catholic tradition and the immanent sensibilities of contemporary students. His

reflection highlights the importance of interpretive skill, theological literacy, and a renewed attentiveness to the formative ecology of the school.

3. Voices from the Classroom: Students and Teachers

Several chapters foreground the experiences and perspectives of those closest to the work of RE: students and teachers.

Two papers examine the voice of students as a catalyst for curriculum reform in Aotearoa New Zealand. Colin MacLeod's *"There's a Difference Between Staying a Catholic and Being a Catholic"* demonstrates the powerful insights offered by students during the development of the national curriculum *Tō Tātou Whakapono—Our Faith*. Through focus groups and informal digital dialogues, students articulated what they find meaningful, challenging, and spiritually relevant. Their voices revealed a desire for real-world relevance, honest conversation, and a curriculum that respects diversity without losing depth.

A companion article by Carswell, MacLeod and Lanner, *Māori Before English*, explores the implications of developing a curriculum in which the Māori language and worldview take precedence. This chapter emphasises the cultural revitalisation integral to Catholic schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand, proposing that RE becomes more authentic and more dialogical when it honours Indigenous epistemologies. The authors illustrate how language, narrative, and place enrich theological learning and strengthen belonging.

The Australian perspective is taken up by Topliss, Lavery, Hicks, and Dickson in *The Perceptions of Early Career Teachers Regarding the Teaching of Religious Education*. Their qualitative study reveals the complexities faced by early career teachers who navigate curriculum expectations, student diversity, and their own formation needs. The findings underscore the necessity of targeted formation programmes, supportive school cultures, and pedagogical mentoring to assist new teachers in developing confidence and capability in RE.

Hyde and Anning's *Religious Education as a Context* offers complementary insights by identifying the distinctive subcultures shaping RE teachers' work in Catholic secondary schools. Their analysis demonstrates how beliefs, norms, and shared practices form a unique subject culture—one that both enables and constrains innovation. Understanding these subcultures, they argue, is essential for effective school leadership, curriculum implementation, and professional learning.

4. Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Dialogue

At the core of this volume is the ongoing question of curriculum design and pedagogical practice in a plural context.

Larkins and Owen's *Why There Is a Place for Dialogue in Religious Education Today* provides a conceptual and practical rationale for dialogical pedagogy. Their chapter suggests that dialogue honours the lived religious diversity of students, promotes critical thinking, and reflects the Church's commitment to encounter and communion. Drawing on student focus groups, they show how dialogical approaches can build engagement, deepen understanding, and open space for the exploration of meaning.

Rymarz, in *Pondering Diversity in Contemporary Culture*, expands the discussion by offering a conceptual framework for understanding religious plurality. Through multiple lenses—sociological, cultural, and theological—he argues that a dialogical approach is not merely desirable but essential. The chapter challenges educators to move beyond outdated assumptions about student religiosity and to adopt pedagogies that resonate with contemporary cultural dynamics.

In *Something Is Not Working! Reimagining Religious Education in Today's Catholic School*, Graeme Mellor provides a provocative and imaginative exploration of RE's future. Drawing on powerful cultural metaphors such as the All Blacks, ANZAC narratives, and biblical encounters, he argues that RE must be reimagined in light of the formative contexts shaping young people. This chapter highlights the need for RE to be integrative, imaginative, and grounded in the lived experience of students.

5. Formation and Professional Learning

Formation emerges as a major theme across the collection, particularly with respect to teacher readiness and capability.

Antonella Poncini's *Formation Fit for Purpose* responds directly to the formation needs of educators working on the "front line" of Catholic schools. She provides a practical framework for curriculum support that addresses the increasing complexity of RE teaching. Her discussion highlights the interdependence of personal, theological, and pedagogical formation, and emphasises the need for sustained institutional investment.

Sultmann, Lamb, Ivers, and Craig's empirical paper *Student Priorities for Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes in Senior Secondary Religious Education* provides valuable data for advancing formation and curriculum design. Their findings reveal clear student preferences for relevant topics, dialogical pedagogy, and outcomes that foster personal meaning, ethical insight, and spiritual identity. These insights have significant implications for teacher formation, curriculum renewal, and system-wide policy.

Hall, Sultmann, and Lamb's *Religious Education in Australia: The Voices of Practitioners and Scholars* extends this discussion by presenting the outcomes of a national colloquium. Their paper synthesises practitioner insights and scholarly perspectives to identify pressing priorities, including theological depth, renewed curriculum structures, and stronger formation pathways. This chapter acts as a bridge between research, policy, and practice.

6. A Coherent and Forward-Facing Contribution

Taken together, the twelve papers present a rich and multifaceted account of religious education in times of rapid cultural change. Several recurrent themes run across the collection:

- **Plurality as reality**: Catholic schools now educate diverse communities where dialogue and inclusion are essential.
- **Identity through engagement**: Maintaining a distinctively Catholic curriculum requires deep engagement with contemporary questions, not withdrawal from them.
- **Student and teacher voice**: Authentic renewal depends on listening carefully to those who teach and those who learn.
- **Cultural and Indigenous perspectives**: Honouring context, especially in Aotearoa New Zealand, enriches theological learning and strengthens identity.
- **Formation and capability**: The future of RE depends on the sustained formation of educators and leaders.
- **Innovation and imagination**: New pathways, pedagogies, and conceptual frameworks are required to meet contemporary realities.

Collectively, these chapters challenge educators, leaders, and policy makers to move beyond incremental adjustments. They call for a more profound re-envisioning of RE—one that is dialogical, inclusive, theologically grounded, culturally responsive, and pedagogically engaging.

As editors, and as scholars committed to mission and curriculum, we offer this volume in the hope that it supports Catholic educators in the shared work of formation and dialogue. In doing so, we affirm the enduring significance of Religious Education as a vital expression of the Catholic school's mission in Australia and New Zealand.

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Article

Pondering Diversity in Contemporary Culture: Towards Establishing a Framework for a Dialogical Approach to Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools

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Abstract: This paper seeks to deepen the understanding of religious plurality using a range of conceptual lenses and then to draw out some implications for a dialogical approach to religious education in Catholic schools. While what was, until very recent times, seen as conventional religious affiliation has certainly weakened in Australia and elsewhere, this does not necessarily lead to a multiplication of communal beliefs, practices and values. Following Smith, Inglehart and others, what has emerged is a dominant cultural hegemony which has a range of characteristics, but the most pertinent for the discussion here is the loss of the transcendent imperative and the subsequent decline in the knowledge of, and identification with, narratives associated with once-dominant religious communities. An understanding of diversity in the current cultural milieu in Australia needs to consider this hegemony as expressed in a commonality of beliefs, values and practices regardless of expressed affiliation, religious or not. Understanding diversity in this framework establishes a basis for better considering what a dialogical approach to religious education would involve. A dialogical approach to religious education is taken as a settled norm and not one that is heavily contested. A number of the implications of the proposed understanding of diversity for religious education are given. These include following a Vygotskian scaffolded approach to pedagogy and seeing an important place for the articulation of the home religious tradition.

Keywords: religious education; diversity; dialogical education

1. Introduction

Higgins (2007, p. 7) notes that a micronarrative is a powerful way to initiate further discussion of complex topics by offering a vignette that distils some key points, which can then be elaborated on. What follows is one such micronarrative.

Some years ago, I was coordinating the school placement program for RE teachers who were in the final year of their teacher training and aspiring to work in Catholic schools. After a 'round', that is, a period of time when the trainee teachers, under supervision, completed a practicum in schools, they returned to the university and were given a chance to work collaboratively and come up with presentations on their dominant experiences of their time in schools. The class divided into groups and in the next session the presentations began.

Two groups presented and a common theme was the 'incredible diversity' amongst the students in their classes and this was contrasted with earlier times when students had much more homogeneous views. All was proceeding smoothly until one brave and recalcitrant student, let's call her Jennifer, raised a provocative point, "Most of the kids in my classes weren't all that different. It was very hard to get them talking, very hard, but when they did they all pretty much said the same things, had the same opinions, liked and disliked the same things. I got the impression they weren't deeply attached to their positions, it was something that they just took in from the ambience in which they lived. It was difficult to find points of difference as so many had trouble expressing their views or arguing for them. No one had any understanding of the Catholic position on anything". A murmur soon

reached a crescendo when others in the class agreed with Jennifer, "yes that was what I experienced too!" This final comment is significant as it points to questioning assumptions about diversity and its implications for religious education in faith-based schools.

As a prelude to discussing some practical strategies to better realize a dialogical approach to religious education in faith-based schools, a conceptual framework is proposed. This seeks to contextualize some of the salient points in Jennifer's narrative. The sources that are drawn to support the proposal constitute some leading thinkers in contemporary social theory but have not been widely applied to Catholic education in general, and religious education in particular. Three substantial points will be made. Firstly, whatever their attributed affiliation, there is often a marked commonality in student views and behaviours. Secondly, students are not engaging with religious communities and have a poor understanding of what could be called the Christian religious narrative. Thirdly, students had difficulty coherently articulating their views, and this may leave them vulnerable to and uncritical of dominant cultural ideologies.

The second part of the paper takes on a much more practical intention. The aim is to examine three key implications of the proposed understanding of diversity for religious education in faith-based schools. While dialogue is valued, in order to be purposeful, it needs to acknowledge the context and background of the school community and especially the student body.

2. Religious Diversity in Contemporary Culture: A Proposition

Singleton et al. (2019) in their study of Australian teenagers contextualized their analysis by taking a longitudinal approach to religious diversity. They noted that diversity is best seen in the changes in patterns of traditional Australian religious affiliation. This is seen most clearly in the declining number of Australians who identify as Catholic or mainline Protestant. What has made the cultural landscape more diverse in a nominal sense is the growth of non-Christan religions and, most significantly, in the dramatic rise in the number of those who express no religious affiliation, the so-called nones. At this meta level it is accurate to describe the Australian religious and social landscape as more plural and diverse. It is necessary, however, to move beyond this analysis to examine more closely communal beliefs, practices and values. At this micro level a range of conceptual descriptors arise, which give an accurate account of large sections of the population irrespective of affiliation, notional or otherwise.

One of the most acknowledged of these descriptors is contained in the work of Smith and his colleagues. This research followed waves of American participants in successive national surveys. In the initial work, the term used to describe the dominant worldview of US teens and emerging adults was Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD is a system that places value on general categories, with a special preference for those which are linked to self-actualization; this is the sense in which therapeutic is used. In place of traditional metaphysical views that align closely with the Christan belief in a transcendent personal God, MTD stresses a deistic conception where God is not absent from creation but is content to leave the created universe to its own devices. The criteria used to establish the categories that make up MTD could be elaborated on; however, this is not the crucial factor here. What is more important is the notion that by using these terms we can classify the beliefs, values and practices of a very large section of the American community. In the final part of the study, completed in 2022, it is noteworthy that the authors argue that MTD, rather than abating, is an even more dominant expression of the lived experience of US teens and emerging adults, and that it applies across conventional religious categories. On a meta level, there can be a growth in religious diversity in that new groups are emerging or previously dominant groups lose strength, but at a micro level, a critical question is whether, across a culture or society, beliefs, values and practices continue to converge irrespective of religious or non-religious categorization. Indicators of religious affiliation are less descriptors of beliefs, values and practices than a consideration of how closely a group or individuals align with the overarching MTD categorization. With the decline in traditional

religious affiliation, what is also imperilled is the immersion of individuals into the great narratives surrounding these traditions. These are the stories, teachings, ritual practices and cultural expressions of these traditions. These narratives are not passively acquired but need constant reiteration to remain known and comprehensible. This disconnection from religious narrative has been widely noted as a significant, longstanding phenomenon and is alluded to by Jennifer in the opening narrative. Appleby, writing in 2001, puts the problem in these terms, "no previous generation of American Catholics, it could be argued, inherited so little of the content and sensibility of the faith from their parents, as have today's youth". Davie (1999, p. 83), speaking from a European perspective and not confining herself to Catholics, is even starker, "an ignorance of even the basic understandings of Christian teachings is the norm in modern Europe, especially among young people; it is not a reassuring attribute".

Similar conclusions about the emergence of new hegemonic cultural patterns can be drawn from studies of globalization. Casanova (2001) discusses the globalization of religion in terms of a process of detraditionalization. In place of the traditional expression of the transcendent, which is tied to historical religious communities, there has arisen a general sacralization of culture best expressed in emerging diffuse cultural norms. Inglehart (2021) examined a series of large international representative surveys and identified a dominant category as individual norms, as opposed to an emphasis on community or family. Markers of these norms include personal beliefs and values, but these norms do not indicate a diversity of views. Rather the transnational movement away from communal family norms leads to a convergence of beliefs, values and practices around a common theme of individualization. The individualization pattern places emphasis on the material world and has little or no reference point with traditional religious categories, which were reliant on strong communal reinforcement, such as the belief in a personal, transcendent God. A pattern noted by Smith and his colleagues is repeated here, namely, a decline in the strength of religious affiliation to historical communities does not necessarily result in a diversification of beliefs, values and practices. What is critical is not to which category people are ascribed, but a more anthropologically grounded sense of culture. This is manifested in how people actually live their lives, and reflected, simply and bluntly put, in what they do and what they believe (Eagleton 2000). In addition, once the strength of traditional cultural norms, reflective of strong communal beliefs, declines, then the association and familiarity of people with these norms also declines. This is a point reinforced by Hervieu-Leger (2000) in her conception of the weakening of the chains of religious memory in countries which in the past have had strong religious associations at both a personal and institutional level.

A key factor to consider is the utility of new dominant norms. They apply to large numbers of people across national boundaries, and offer an alternative way of understanding beliefs, values and practices that is not dependent on self-described religious categories. Once religious affiliation declines both in terms of nominal affiliation and the strength of that affiliation, then what emerges are dominant cultural patterns which can be hegemonic in their expression. A similar argument is proposed by Archer (2012). She argues that we need to see young people, especially, as more likely to express communitive class norms rather than communal ones. These norms are, in essence, reflective of personal autonomy and not reliance on strong traditional socialization processes at least those initiated by family or local community. What is dominant and determinative is the wider culture, as this now becomes the primary socializing agent, and a study of culture reveals that these new patterns have common characteristics, so people from geographically and historically different regions can be shaped by common cultural forces.

An important consideration about the impact of these new cultural forces is given in the work of Bauman. Bauman (2003) noted the loss of common understanding and adherence to traditional cultural patterns, a process that gained pace from the 1960s onward. He postulated that late modernity can also be described as a liquid modernity, a world where new allegiances and affiliations emerge, but which have no strong attachments and

can be easily overturned or replaced. Bauman (2003) drew attention to the fact that this condition was not, overall, a favourable one, especially for younger people, as they lacked enduring connections to communities held together by shared beliefs and practices. In a series of powerful metaphors, he describes this new disposition as one of alienation and isolation, where younger people are like strangers and can easily succumb to prevailing social pressures, the most important of which is pervasive consumerism. This condition is not derived from abiding, discerned principles, but is expressed inchoately and is difficult to explain or justify.

By way of summation, let us return to the micronarrative at the beginning of this paper and attempt to, more directly, match key points in the proposal offered here with the observations of Jennifer. The decline in the size of, and importance of, traditional religious association, does not necessarily lead to an increase in the diversity of beliefs, values and practices. Jennifer observed the same phenomenon when she remarked that most of the students in her class had the same opinions, values, and liked and disliked the same things. Declining strong and formative religious affiliation and socialization is being replaced by new patterns of beliefs, values and practices. These new cultural norms are not restricted to geographical areas and have some dominant features, such as highlighting the rise of individualization, a decline in a sense of transcendence and a lack of knowledge of religious narratives, especially those associated with previously dominant religious communities. In the particular instance of students in Catholic schools, this would equate to a lack of knowledge of Catholic beliefs and practices. In addition, students do not have a strong attachment to emerging cultural paradigms, but rather a transitory and incoherent attachment that makes purposeful dialogue challenging. This is an observation germane to Jennifer's narrative. She noted that the students in her class were not able to easily articulate their position and often lacked a clear reference to underlying principles or to the Catholic tradition.

3. Part Two: Some Implications for Religious Education in Faith-Based Schools

A dialogical approach in education can be described as a purposeful activity that is directed toward increasing critical understanding and insight as a platform for self-directed learning (Bright 2013). If this view is uncontested, then a key question becomes how is purposeful dialogue best achieved, and, in the context of this paper, how is it achieved in a cultural context where students lack connection with religious communities? To return to Bauman's analogy, students may be described as strangers vulnerable to prevailing social pressures, such as individualization and consumerism. Several key principles suggest themselves:

1. Foundational learning is critical to encourage students to engage in purposeful dialogue. This is premised on the Vygotskian idea of scaffolded learning and involves using a wide range of sound pedagogical principles.
2. In faith-based schools, the teaching and practices of the home tradition would be offered as a departure point for purposeful dialogue. This is consistent with the stated aim of the school and is a powerful way to focus learning by reducing cognitive load.
3. In changed cultural circumstances, the role of the teacher remains critical and ongoing support for them is essential.

Each of these principles will be examined in more detail. Firstly, the notion of building on foundational learning sits well within a Vygotskian paradigm of scaffolded learning (Rymarz 2013). Implicit in Jennifer's narrative is the frustration that arises from an unrealized expectation about what students are able to accomplish once learning complexity increases. This notion of staged learning, moving from simple to more complex tasks, is well described in the Vygotskian paradigm (Wertsch 1985). Vygotsky made a distinction between what he called spontaneous and scientific concepts in learning (Karpov 2003). Spontaneous concepts are the result of generalizations based on typical human experience. Many of these, however, may be incorrect. There is a resonance here with the discussion in the first part of this paper. One of the conclusions drawn was that students' articulation

and understanding of a range of religious or philosophical issues is not necessarily diverse. A more accurate description would describe students' views as uncritically clustering around dominant cultural positions. In Vygotskian terminology, what is needed is an initial emphasis on acquiring foundational or scientific knowledge (Vygotsky 1987a). Scientific concepts are those that may be verified and arise from the generalized experience of humanity. Scientific concepts allow the student to "see the world in a new way or to restructure and raise spontaneous concepts to a new level" (Vygotsky 1987b, p. 220). The role of the teacher is to extend the student by providing enough structure, in the form of instruction, to allow students to use their new knowledge to reappraise their experience and prior learning. Vygotsky (1986, p. 159) expressed this idea in the following terms, "scientific concepts. . .just start their development, rather than finish it, at a moment when the child learns the term or word-meaning denoting the new concept".

If we can see some overlap between scientific concepts and the acquisition of more complex theological and philosophical concepts, then we have a basis for engaging in purposeful dialogue once students are familiar with foundational ideas. Without this prior knowledge, dialogue is not impossible, but it is greatly enhanced when those involved in the dialogue have a level of understanding and vocabulary which will allow them to purposefully engage.

Secondly, the preeminence of the home tradition in faith-based schools is significant, aside from the explicit and long held understanding that religious education will be based on the home tradition (Ryan 2002). In Catholic schools it cannot, however, be assumed that students, even those who express Catholic affiliation, have an appropriate understanding or articulation of the beliefs, values and practices of Catholicism. Given this lack of background, pedagogical strategies need to be identified that reduce the cognitive load on students. (Gredler 2009). The notion of cognitive load is important in contemporary approaches to learning (Hattie 2009). Student learning is better facilitated when the amount of information to be processed is limited (Harris 1999; Darling Hammond 2008). The role of the teacher is to set these limits and to direct learning toward key so-called threshold concepts (Mudge 2014). Over time the cognitive range is expanded, as students are able to access information that has already been integrated into long term memory.

To illustrate let us return to Jennifer's narrative and add a feature. Jennifer found it difficult to stimulate and engage the class. The point about cognitive load can be made if we consider what the topic and the unit of work was that the discussion was embedded in. Let us suppose that it was a complex topic in a middle or senior secondary class like understanding the notion of God acting in the world. The goal here is to engage students, get them to think more deeply about the topic, work with others and develop critical understanding—the hallmarks of dialogical approaches. To achieve these goals it is necessary, however, to provide adequate cognitive scaffolding, and a critical part of this is to introduce the topic in a fashion that does not overwhelm students. The most obvious way this can occur is if too much or too little information is given. Too little would encompass a lack of instruction. The difficulty here is that, given the proposal in the first part of this paper, many students are likely not to have well-formed metaphysical views. Too much information from a wide variety of sources would overwhelm the learner's working memory and make meaningful integration of new information difficult.

A cognitive advantage of staying close to the home tradition is that it offers a pathway for future learning by providing a quantum of information that is processable. Providing this scaffolding is not the end point of this topic but rather a departure point. To continue the analogy, before any group discussion, Jennifer could provide instruction on the nature of God as envisaged by St Augustine. This situates the learning well within the home tradition, allowing students to expand their thinking on God and appropriate the Christan notion from an authoritative source. This can form the basis for future learning and encounters with other perspectives.

Thirdly, a perennial issue for faith-based schools is how best to support RE teachers. In changed cultural circumstances this support is even more imperative. Assumptions about

prior learning and lived experiences, which in the past predisposed students more fully to participate in religious education, can no longer be easily made. Jennifer has correctly identified some of the challenges inherent in teaching RE. An open question is how best to support her. What is not in dispute is the need for that support. A return to Vygotskian theory can assist in providing a template for better supporting teachers in Catholic schools.

A basic premise of Vygotskian learning theory is that students have enormous learning potential, but this needs to be harnessed, largely through social interaction (Vygotsky 1987b).

One of the key formators of the learning environment for students is the teacher. Learning here is understood as an ultimately transformative process, one that alters the way learners see themselves and the world around them. Within this framework, the teacher's role is to provide direction, support and structure to assist students in reaching their potential (Vygotsky 1994). The teacher here works in collaboration with the learner, and the best analogy to describe this relationship is one of a partnership, where the teacher acts as a mentor or guide. The epitome of a good teacher is one who is able to enter into a dialogue with students and scaffold their learning well using a range of pedagogical strategies aligned to the students in her class. If students engage well and are able to process new information and integrate present and past learning, this is an indication that the teacher is challenging students at a level that extends but does not overwhelm them. The teacher's role as an instructor is not at odds with the teacher creating space for reflective practice in the classroom. The efficacy of the teacher as a guide or mentor is dependent on how this is carried out.

4. Conclusions: A Second Narrative

To conclude this paper, let us return to an updated narrative of Jennifer. In this one, she has been teaching with a disposition that is directed more to the commonality amongst her students rather than their diversity.

We taught the unit on symbols and rituals and it was, as always, a challenge. A lot of effort was put into giving students some background as they do not have strong content knowledge in these areas. A powerful pedagogical practice was to use a contrast paradigm, that is, look at a ritual in other religious traditions. We focused on Judaism, as there is no way we can cover all religions. Just too much information. The section we discussed as a class was ritual practice. We looked at some of the Jewish rituals such as those associated with shabbat. Students were in small groups and we did some fish bowling as well. Where we are headed is to try to distil some essential features of religious rituals, and if they could be applied to ritual practices in Catholicism. We have completed a lot of work on ritual and symbols in Catholicism. It was covered in earlier years as well. In this unit it is time to expand the cognitive range of the students.

Some key differences are evident when compared to the opening narrative and these direct attention to the key implications of this paper for future scholarly discourse. There is a much tighter learning focus. Here, the intent of the discussion is tied to a unit, and one aspect of the unit—ritual practices—is identified. There is a clear idea of where this unit is headed and the overarching cognitive aim. There is an obvious link to the home tradition and the acknowledgement that students' prior knowledge is limited, but this can be addressed by providing well-targeted teaching. What is also very important is the range of pedagogical practices, such as fish bowling, that Jennifer refers to. In a paper of this size, it is not possible to go into a detailed discussion of pedagogy, sufficed to say the dialogical learning and its progression to a more self-directed critical understanding is dependent on the implementation of a range of strong pedagogical strategies. These are, in turn, dependent on the teacher's capacity to engage with and identify, like Jennifer, the learning dynamic in the classroom.

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Formation Fit for Purpose: Empowering Religious Educators Working in Catholic Schools

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to provide curriculum support to religious educators working in Catholic schools. The paper provides a practical response to research advocating serious attention be given to religious educators because they are at the "coalface" of Catholic education, increasingly confronted by content and policy decisions, the diverse values and needs of their students, and other competing cultural and social challenges. Religious educators play a significant role in the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church as interpreters of Scripture and Tradition and can positively or negatively influence the quality of their students' learning and its application. Entitled **RECALL,** the support offered to religious educators in this paper is **r**esearch-led and utilises **e**ducational, standards-based principles. It is a **c**ommunity-minded **a**pproach that aims to build religious **l**iteracy and deepen the religious educators' awareness and connections to the **l**egacy of the Catholic Faith Tradition. The desired outcome is to inspire evidence-based conversations encompassing faith and reason, the perceived value and reality of the identity and mission of the Catholic Church, and its impact on Catholic culture and education. Intended to enhance rather than replace existing professional formation, the approach has structures, pedagogical processes, and practices that draw from a set of overarching theoretical considerations. Furthermore, the approach employs three guiding questions for categorising and analysing Catholic content. The questions are: (i) "Who are we as Catholics and what is our mission?" (ii) "What do we believe?" and (iii) "How do we practice?" The proposed curriculum support to religious educators may foster a culture of learning in Religious Education that is focused on improving and progressing the quality of educational outcomes for students. The premise is that if religious educators are supported to engage with the great Gospel narrative, their students may do the same.

Keywords: religious education; religious educators; curriculum; religious literacy; formation; vocation; content knowledge; pedagogy; assessment practice; Catholic identity; Catholic mission

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to offer curriculum support to religious educators as classroom teachers and leaders working in Catholic schools. Religious Education is a priority learning area (Congregation for Catholic Education 1988) with spiritual, religious, and educational dimensions that are directly aligned to what Saint Paul describes as a precious treasure (2 Tim 1:14). The treasure is the Gospel message—the life and teachings of Jesus. The Catholic Church as a community of believers in Jesus, as the Son of God, has a clear identity and mission to proclaim and give witness to the Gospel message (Francis 2013; Paul VI 1975). As members of the Church community, religious educators are interpreters of the faith and "guardians" of the Gospel message. Hence, they are expected to draw from Scripture and the Tradition derived from the Gospel message (Vatican Council II 1965b, 1965c). Religious educators are trained to impart the Church's essential beliefs and practices founded on the Gospel message, the assumption being that the training provided to religious educators is both necessary and relevant. Such an assumption seems feasible,

given that religious educators are also provided with a Religious Education curriculum derived from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Rymarz et al. 2021). The Catechism outlines and explains the Church's beliefs and practices under four categories: the Creed, the Sacraments, Christian morality, and Prayer (The Holy See 1993). However, to what extent are the expectation and the practice truly aligned? In fact, further related questions seem to emerge:

- To what extent do religious educators understand how to successfully implement the Religious Education curriculum?
- How successful are they at eliciting the appropriate understandings and interpretations of the Church's mission?
- And, most importantly, to what degree do religious educators actually value the Church's identity and mission?

The scope of this paper is twofold. The first part draws on research about the nature and role of religious educators working in Catholic schools. The context of the research is the academic attributes of Religious Education and how religious educators perceive those attributes as well as the spiritual and religious dimensions of the learning area. The research considers the influence that teachers have on student learning (Hattie 2023; Timperley et al. 2020), and, given that religious educators are teachers and leaders in Catholic schools, they too influence student learning. The research also points to the decline of religious affiliation as well as other cultural and social challenges that impact the role of religious educators (Franchi and Rymarz 2022; Sullivan 2018). However, the manner in which religious educators think and act in relation to their role matters most. Evidence substantiating the stipulated realities are valued over and above preconceived ideas and assumptions.

The second part of the paper proposes an approach that targets the content in any given Religious Education curriculum and supports religious educators to better engage with that content. RECALL is the name of the support offered, and it is pragmatic in nature (Thayer 1982). The acronym stands for an approach that is led by research and educational principles grounded in the Catholic intellectual tradition and holistic educational philosophy (Convery et al. 2021; Montessori 1949). The approach recognises the benefits of drawing from multiple academic disciplines such as theology, anthropology, and sociology. The approach also applies four overarching theoretical considerations and uses three guiding questions. The questions act as categories for clarifying and interrogating Catholic content. At an individual level, the approach may support religious educators to recall, re-assess, and re-imagine how to improve their engagement with the Catholic content and, in turn, improve their delivery. At a collective level, the approach may inspire evidence-based dialogue that evaluates existing curriculum structures and standards as well as how professional formation programs are developed. The desired outcomes are improved teacher efficacy and student engagement with Catholic content and an overall enhanced quality of learning in Religious Education. Considering a move away from institutional religions like Christianity, Christian values are not necessarily understood or appreciated (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024; Convery et al. 2021). Therefore, new formative actions such as RECALL may help religious educators re-assess their perceptions of the underlying Catholic faith narrative and how they proclaim it to others.

2. The Catholic Religious Educator

Religious educators are at the "coalface" of Catholic education (Rymarz and Franchi 2019) at a time in history that consists of competing political and cultural ideologies and values that challenge the work of Catholic schools and, specifically, the identity and mission of the Church (Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference 2022). Religious educators working in Catholic schools, as classroom teachers and leaders, have a significant role to play in the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church (Francis 2013; Vatican Council II 1965b). Similarly, principals, leaders, and staff employed in Catholic schools are called to promote the Church's mission (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, 2022), that is, to give

authentic proclamation and witness to the Gospel message of Jesus (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, 1988, 2022). However, the role of a religious educator is much more than that. The role is multifaceted and is becoming increasingly challenging (Cullen 2019; Scott 2019; Stuart-Buttle 2017). This is due to the complex nature and role of Religious Education (Franchi and Rymarz 2022; Scott 2015; Sullivan 2017), whereby the complexities extend beyond the Catholic Church due to humanity's ongoing search for meaning and purpose (Nelson 2010). Furthermore, the decline of religious affiliation and the belief in God, as well as the lack of relevancy of religion, have contributed to the changing needs of students and their engagement with Religious Education (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024; Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference 2024; National Catholic Education Commission 2022). Students have also been impacted by the rapidly changing landscapes of technological advancements, cultural diversity, and associated social issues (Rymarz and Cleary 2018). Amidst the complications of what is currently described as a "change of era" (Francis 2015), religious educators are called upon to solely uphold the distinctive Catholic culture of the school (Davis and Franchi 2021), even though this responsibility is incumbent on school principals and whole school communities (Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, 2022).

As religious leaders and professionals in their field, religious educators are called to contribute to Catholic education and student learning in this new era by continuing to support parents in their role as primary educators and to take on the lay responsibilities that once were assigned to the consecrated religious and clergy (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, 2022). Religious educators fulfil their vocation within the context of a Catholic school setting in two ways. Firstly, they potentially evangelise through their instruction and enthusiasm for living the Christian message. Secondly, they impart the life and teachings of Jesus. The intention focuses on the religious educators' contribution to holistically developing students' knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Faith Tradition (Montessori 1949). The responsibility for the transformation of lives is universal across all Catholic communities. It is linked to the proclamation of the life and teachings of Jesus and the continuation of his mission (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022; Francis 2018; The Holy See 2020). Such an expectation requires religious educators to be content, pedagogy, and assessment experts and well versed in theological understandings about Scripture and Tradition (Hackett 2010; National Catholic Education Commission 2018). Religious educators need to be "serious, systematic and scholarly" (Rymarz et al. 2021, p. 1) when it comes to student learning in Religious Education. As agents and interpreters of the Catholic faith in conjunction with being moderators of learning (Pollefeyt 2020; Rymarz et al. 2021, p. 62), religious educators are required to understand and apply the confessional and educational principles that encompass Religious Education.

In Australian Catholic education, more specifically Western Australia, religious educators belong to teams of classroom teachers and leaders who are expected to promote Religious Education as a priority learning area whilst affirming the proclamation of the Word of God (Holohan 1999; National Catholic Education Commission 2018). The expectation requires active engagement with the curriculum, the religious life of the school, and the Catholic education system to which they belong (Hackett et al. 2017). These religious educators need to adhere to the governing secretariat working on behalf of the Western Australian bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009) as well as State and Commonwealth educational authorities (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited 2022; School Curriculum and Standards Authority 2024). Over the years, the contributions that religious educators have made to Catholic education in Western Australia have been significant, notwithstanding the challenges faced. They, like others in their profession, have found themselves at the "crossroads", based on longstanding cultural realities (Davis and Franchi 2021). Research conducted in Western Australia about religious educators working in Catholic schools focuses on the perceptions of Religious Education as a priority learning area (Hackett 2009, 2010; Poncini 2018, 2021, 2023). The research reveals misalignment between policy and practice and provides the

impetus for ongoing investigation and professional support. Furthermore, the research suggests religious educators require support to navigate their way through the curriculum and the challenges confronting them in this "change of era".

3. A Local Perspective

The study of religious educators in Western Australia (Hackett 2009, 2010; Poncini 2018, 2021, 2023) together with feedback from leaders' forums (Catholic Education Western Australia 2023b), curriculum reviews (Catholic Education Western Australia 2019, 2023c), and faith surveys (Catholic Education Western Australia 2023a) have provided two important insights. Firstly, it is clear from the evidence that religious educators perceive Religious Education in diverse and, at times, contrasting ways. Secondly, the religious educators are confronted by student and parental disengagement with Religious Education.

The repeated phrasing and comments from classroom teachers and leaders of Catholic schools in Western Australia regarding the Religious Education learning area provide the grounds for action and new research problems. For instance, research completed in 2018 investigating perceptions of a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education found that religious educators disagreed about the use of assessments in Religious Education. Further probing revealed religious educators disagreed with the nature and role of Religious Education (Poncini 2018). Findings relevant to the perceived nature and role of Religious Education appear in research conducted in the United Kingdom (Stuart-Buttle 2017). The comments by one school leader and one classroom teacher in Western Australia highlight the differing perceptions of religious educators about Religious Education.

> **[School Leader]** I think The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment is a waste of time especially at primary level. I am a teacher at a Catholic school and have a very strong faith. I send my children to Catholic schools. However, I really hate when my children's experience during Religious Education is given a grade. I feel since formal assessment in this area it has turned many older children off learning about God.
>
> **[Teacher]** Until now, RE was all about exploring one's feelings; 'touchy feely' emotions, driven teaching style. Now I think we are getting more balance coming in with knowledge about the history, knowledge about events, knowledge about Scripture, parts of the Mass and all that sort of language. The BRLA gives us a framework for teaching RE.

Similarly, a 2020 pilot study investigating the extent to which alignment exists between policy expectations and school-based practices in Religious Education found that religious educators continued to be divided (Petersen and Poncini 2020). The comments of two participants represent the mentioned disparity in perceptions about the nature and role of Religious Education.

> **[Participant 1]** I think we really need greater focus on the person of Jesus and promoting love, compassion, joy and acceptance of all. Not sure if teaching the history of the Church and the Old Testament always complements this message.
>
> **[Participant 2]** I often feel that many of the learnt prayers are not relevant to our students and perhaps we are better off teaching students to converse with God in their own way that brings meaning to them.

The findings from the pilot study revealed that most religious educators recognised Religious Education (88.2%) as an academic learning area, but they were divided (47.1%) when asked how students treated Religious Education. Fewer participants (23.5%) agreed that students recognised Religious Education as a necessary subject. Three of the participants stated:

1. "We know that it [RE] is [a learning area] but often it is not, as more focus is on literacy and numeracy."

2. "Absolutely not. It [RE] is generally poorly timetabled and used as a filler for people's timetables. REC's and those who teach RE full time understand its value as the first learning area."
3. "No, it [RE] is not. RE is not treated as an equal with other core areas. Nor is it a priority for staff. RE is generally a 'fill in subject' for teachers who are down a line in their timetable. Untrained staff also being put into 11 and 12 classes. . ."

Collectively, the findings from the local research reveal misconceptions about Religious Education and significant inconsistencies between expected policy and school-based practices.

The local research signals a significant issue challenging the profession. Firstly, a question from the religious educators continued to surface from the body of research. That is, "How do I make the Catholic faith stuff meaningful to students?" Secondly, the religious educators attributed student disengagement in Religious Education and a lack of parental support for the learning area as major challenges. The comment of one classroom teacher encapsulates the opinion of many.

> **[Teacher]** Students don't value doing The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment and doing well in it because many parents and families don't value Religion in schools . . .. Anything that has a Catholic logo or presence to it is considered second class or of a lower grade in education because it's not valued at home.

Following on from the local research, similar comments were made by religious educators in their feedback regarding the administration of the large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education (Catholic Education Western Australia 2023c).

> **[Teacher]** Unfortunately, the motivation and engagement from students was not fantastic. This is not the fault of the test, more so that their parents and their own attitude towards RE.

Comparable feedback was provided by religious educators at a local leaders' forum.

> **[Principal]** Our challenge is navigating 'two worlds', one foot in the Tradition and one in dealing with what reality in front of us is all about. That is, the issues around secularisation and wellbeing. These issues are increasing for students and parents.

Finally, feedback from a local faith survey provides further compelling evidence of the significant issue challenging religious educators.

> **[Teacher]** I believe in God and I have faith, but I don't believe in the Catholic practices. In modern society, we don't feel comfortable because the kids challenge you on every point or practice you are trying to teach.

The findings and recommendations from the local research, together with the associated survey data, suggest that real complexities surrounding Religious Education do exist in Western Australia, and further investigation is warranted. The complexities impact the work of religious educators, primarily, how they perceive the nature and role of Religious Education. Hence, how can religious educators be supported?

4. Addressing the Research Problem

In response to the research question, it appears necessary to first focus on the identity and mission of Christ. Saint Paul reminds Christians in his second letter to Timothy, "We have been trusted to look after something precious; guard it with help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us." (2 Tim 1:14, Jones 1974). Over time, and through Scripture and Tradition, the Catholic Church has continued to uphold the teachings of Saint Paul and the Apostles. She recognises the truths about God's salvation for all of humankind and that salvation can be transmitted only through the identity and mission of Christ (Vatican Council II 1965a). God's revelation of God's self since creation and throughout history is remembered and celebrated by Catholics with deep symbolism and ritual. Within the

denominational perspective, and as an extension of this reality, communities of men and women have faithfully dedicated their lives to living the Gospel message entrusted to them (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, 2022). One such community is religious educators working in Catholic schools. Religious educators have responded to their calling and acted as custodians entrusted to guard what is deemed "precious". According to the saving plan of God, the precious gift religious educators are passing on to their students is shaping their identity, telling them from whence they have come, who they are, and where they are going. The journey of a religious educator, as that of all members of the Catholic Church, is enlightening and challenging, yet endurance prevails because the narrative continues to thrive.

Given the significance of the Gospel narrative, a new approach has been developed to help support religious educators as they continue to proclaim and give witness to the narrative. The approach is called RECALL (Figure 1 identifies the key elements). It offers religious educators support to better understand, categorise, and interpret Catholic content, and, in turn, help students to do the same. The approach is pragmatic in nature (Thayer 1982) and research led. Drawing from the Catholic intellectual tradition and educational philosophy (Convery et al. 2021; Montessori 1949), the approach endorses holistic and multidisciplinary processes. The approach also utilises inquiry and standards-based educational principles that focus on improving and progressing the quality of student learning (Department of Education 2018; School Curriculum and Standards Authority 2024). Religious educators are guided by questions that help them to categorise content from Religious Education curricula for the purpose of interrogation. Community-mindedness is encouraged for the purpose of raising and sharing religious awareness and literacy. The aim of the approach is to strengthen the religious educators' understanding and engagement with the legacy of the Gospel message. The significance of the approach is the recognition that through inquiry, individuals, and specifically students in Religious Education classrooms, are allowed to question and flourish in a culture of learning made possible by religious educators who value and prioritise quality pedagogy (Rymarz et al. 2021) and support intentionally designed assessment practices (Poncini 2021, 2023). The benefits point to an improved quality of student learning and the strengthening of the credibility of Religious Education as a learning area.

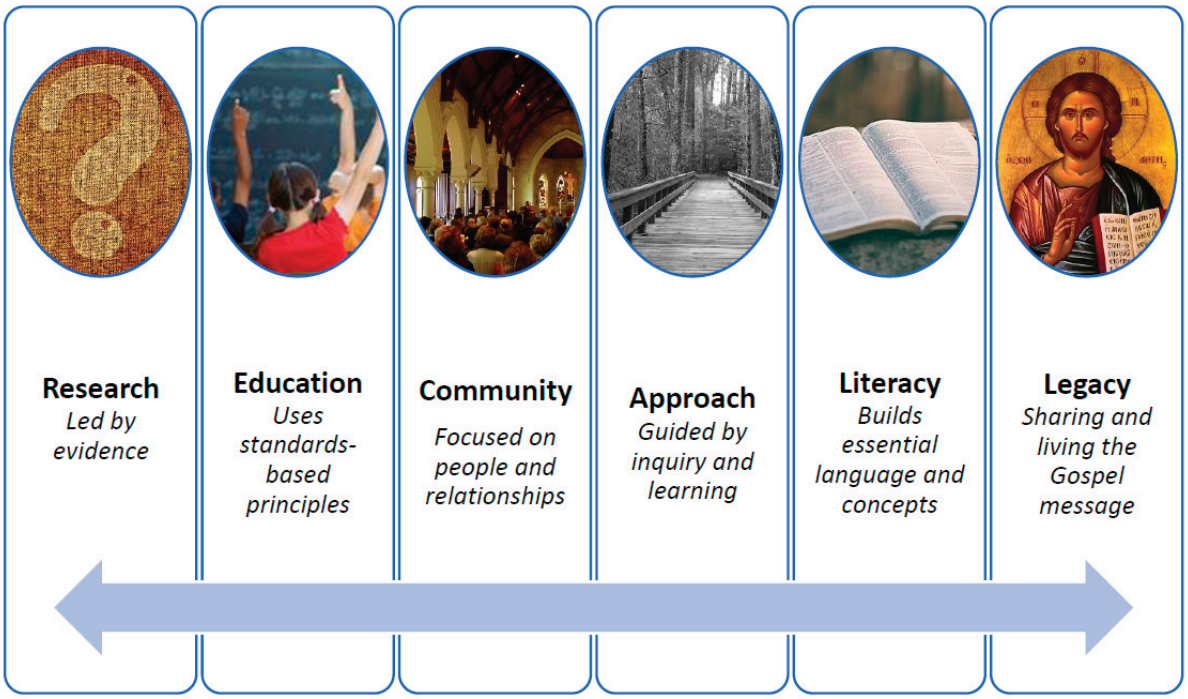

Figure 1. RECALL: An approach for supporting religious educators.

4.1. Considerations

Four theoretical considerations underpin and shape the elements of RECALL. Each of the considerations focuses on the re-assessment of perceptions and practices relevant to religious educators and their role.

4.1.1. The Re-Assessment of Perceived Identity and Mission

The first theoretical consideration is a call to re-assess the religious educators' lived experiences, perceptions, and manifested practices associated with the identity and mission of the Catholic Church. The re-assessment process avoids assumptions about what religious educators perceive and invites them to explore and examine their personal and professional values, motivations, and needs in ways that help to address and re-imagine the wider catechetical significance of their work. Prior to attending to the Catholic content in a Religious Education curriculum, religious educators may be guided to closely reflect upon their personal and professional beliefs of themselves, their images of God, who they believe they are in relation to God, and who they believe the Catholic Church community is in relation to God. The theoretical consideration builds on Catholic scholarship advocating for the strengthening and depth of awareness of religious educators about the Catholic Faith Tradition (D'Orsa and D'Orsa 2020; McKinney 2021; Sultmann and Hall 2022). The literature suggests that teacher training coupled with teacher experience improves the chances of religious educators delivering the Religious Education curriculum as intended by system administrators (Vatican Council II 1965b).

4.1.2. The Re-Assessment of Faith Formation

The second theoretical consideration calls for a review of the titles and structures of formation programs directed at religious educators. From a philosophical perspective, the Catholic Church has always signposted the expected role of religious educators. She has been clear on the necessity for the formation of religious educators working in Catholic schools and about the type of formation required (The Holy See 2020; Vatican Council II 1965b). Formation, in terms of knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition, involves Catholic theology and educational theory (McKinney 2021; National Catholic Education Commission 2018). However, given the complexity surrounding Religious Education (Scott 2015), a re-assessment of the phrase "faith formation" may be timely and necessary. The reasoning behind the assertion is the inadequate communication of the significance and integral nature of the spiritual (transcendental), religious (sacramental and liturgical community encounters), and educational (application of principles and practices) dimensions of Religious Education as a learning area. Nor does the phrase highlight the importance of the study of faith and reason as the unifying factors for the discovery of truth (Convery et al. 2021). To avoid false dichotomies, the theoretical consideration underpinning the approach for supporting religious education advocates for "professional formation" to be used instead of "faith formation". The consideration is about embedding and living the faith through evidence-based educational standards and practices (Poncini 2023).

4.1.3. The Re-Assessment of Family and Parish Engagements

The third theoretical consideration calls for a re-assessment of the relationships that exist between the religious educators, the wider Catholic school community, and the parish(es) and diocese to which their schools belong. The consideration draws on the Eucharistic life of the Church to gather, listen, share, and proclaim the Good News (John Paul II 2003). The aims of the consideration are twofold. Firstly, to explore and examine the ways schools and parishes work together in support and service of one another in promoting the Gospel message. Secondly, to challenge the role that some religious educators may experience as the sole drivers of Catholic culture for their schools (Davis and Franchi 2021). It is important that the responsibility is recognised and reclaimed so that the Catholic school truly becomes a place for the integration of faith, life, and culture (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009; Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, para.

37; 1997, para. 11; Holohan 1999). A focus on how religious educators engage with families and parishes, and more broadly, how Catholic schools and parishes engage, may facilitate opportunities for a renewal of vocational commitments (Isiah 64:8) and the possibility of new mentoring and apprenticeship initiatives (D'Orsa and D'Orsa 2013).

4.1.4. The Re-Assessment of Planning Documents

The fourth theoretical consideration calls for a re-assessment of the planning structures and documentation for implementing Religious Education as a learning area. Given the evidence thus far, there is a need to further explore how religious educators prepare to deliver and engage students with the Catholic content in the curriculum and how to best support them. A "spiritualised and simplified" approach that "responds appropriately to the cultural and social issues of its time" is required (Ratzinger 1970, p. 118). Such an approach should involve educational inquiry-based methods and standards (Poncini 2023). A first step in the consideration is the tangible and objective benefits that the Western Australian Judging Standards for Catholic Religious Education provide. Furthermore, the collaborative design and development of valid and reliable assessment tools/tasks and moderation opportunities generated are also beneficial (Poncini 2021, 2023; Rymarz et al. 2021). An example is the exemplification of student work for grading and reporting purposes. A second step involves religious educators collegially scoping and mapping Catholic content from their respective Religious Education curricula. Appropriate and well-structured planning documents (developed through the shared understandings of the concepts and patterns underpinning the Catholic content) may help religious educators improve their lesson planning, clarify language and concepts, and make better connections. Further scoping and mapping of Religious Education content with the content of other learning areas may better support the integration of pedagogies and resourcing across the Catholic school curriculum.

4.2. The Application of the Approach

As the proposed approach, RECALL targets religious educators because of the significant role they play in Catholic schools (Francis 2013; Vatican Council II 1965b). The acronym represents a research-led approach that utilises educational-, inquiry-, and standard-based principles. The approach is community-minded and aimed at building religious literacy. The purpose of the approach is to deepen the religious educators' awareness of and connections to the legacy of the Catholic Faith Tradition. The implementation of the approach will provide religious educators with structures, processes, and standards to address and respond to the complexities of their daily work. Other stakeholders of Catholic education may also benefit from the adoption of the approach. Each of the key elements of RECALL is described below.

4.2.1. The Approach Is Research-Led

The approach draws from local, national, and international research relevant to Religious Education and the role of religious educators. Pragmatic and multidisciplinary perspectives (Thayer 1982) founded on a Christian worldview (Convery et al. 2021) are endorsed. Such perspectives value the human person and begin with an investigation of people and their constructed realities (Roy 2016). They promote shared wisdom through "every means to study how we can bring the Christian message to modern man" (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022; Paul VI 1975). The research-led approach challenges subjective experiences of reality through scientific inquiry. The approach confronts assumptions that suggest, for example, that religious educators are fully aware and completely immersed in the identity and mission of the Church. The benefit for Religious Education is that scientific inquiry helps to validate and evaluate existing policy expectations and practices. Furthermore, the structures, processes, and standards used in the approach are scrutinised.

The approach is led by the research question, "How can religious educators working in Catholic schools in Western Australia be supported to improve and progress the quality of student learning in religious education?" Associated questions include the following:

- How can religious educators be supported to engage with the identity and mission of the Catholic Church?
- How can religious educators be supported to develop a deeper understanding of the Catholic Church?
- How can religious educators be supported to engage with the beliefs of the Catholic Church?
- How can religious educators be supported to live and give witness to the beliefs and devotional practices of the Catholic Church?

In addition, questions associated with the planning and implementation of the Religious Education curriculum may also be explored.

- How can religious educators be supported to implement the Religious Education Curriculum and engage students with the identity and mission of the Catholic Church?
- How can engagement with the identity and mission of the Catholic Church be validly and reliably measured?

It is also worth noting that the questions may apply to religious educators and their role in Catholic education systems across Australia and elsewhere.

4.2.2. The Approach Adopts Educational Principles

Aligned with the research-led ideals of the approach are standards-based educational theories and principles (Department of Education 2018). The educational principles and their underlying theories promote inquiry and cultures of learning focused on improving and progressing the quality of student learning (Timperley et al. 2020).

The educational policies shaping the approach and guiding Religious Education in Catholic schools in Western Australia are aligned with those of other learning areas and part of a "quality" agenda shaping Australian education systems and sectors (Department of Education 2018). The agenda builds on standard-setting in education, promotes valid and reliable evidence-based measures, and targets teacher efficacy and whole-system capacity building (Caldwell 2018; Masters 2018). The aim of the agenda is to improve and progress student learning. In Catholic Education Western Australia, Religious Education is the shared responsibility of the diocesan bishops and is promulgated by them to be treated as the first of nine learning areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009). To support the work of all educators working in Catholic Education Western Australia, a recently developed policy, Quality Catholic Education, outlines the strategic directives for the system. The policy paves the way forward to improving the quality of student learning in Religious Education and all other academic learning areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2019). A directive specific to Religious Education recommends that Religious Education be actively promoted and appropriately resourced. However, such quality assurance measures may struggle to become a reality, let alone a priority, if the active promotion of the learning area is not fully understood and valued.

The proposed approach addresses the educational directives relevant to Catholic Education Western Australia by attending, first and foremost, to the personal and professional lived experiences of religious educators. The approach also considers the question relevant to the cultural changes that have emerged in recent times and are challenging the institutional beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church: "What will people in the future say about the efforts that we have made as Church?" (Rymarz and Sharkey 2019, p. 1). In keeping with Pope Francis' response, the approach endorses the promotion of missionary transformation through effective education that leads to discernment (Francis 2018).

4.2.3. The Approach Is Relational and Community-Minded

The approach is people-focused, and the voices of religious educators are given primacy (Cullen 2017, 2019; Poncini 2018, 2021; Stuart-Buttle 2017). The goal is to assist religious educators to establish harmonious relationships within their school communities and support them to bridge the gaps between the school and parish and the parish and the wider community. Religious educators are supported to re-assess the implementation of sacramental programs and student and adult formation programs, including retreats. A focal point is the use of and reflection on the Church's liturgical calendar (Davis and Franchi 2021). At the heart of the support offered to religious educators is the re-establishment of covenant relationships forged by shared experiences about Scripture and Tradition. The intention is to lead students and adults on the path to Jesus and full trust in God (Montessori 1949; O'Shea 2018).

The approach attempts to better align the Catholic school and Religious Education curricula (Ott 2016). The alignment process involves an emphasis on the understanding and close mapping of the catechetical dimension of the school using a transcendental style of educational leadership (Sultmann and Hall 2022). Transcendental leadership fosters reflection and cultivates mission-minded cultures that enable transformation (D'Orsa and D'Orsa 2013, p. 237). Religious educators who are supported to lead in a transcendental style may recognise the importance of living sacramentally and in communion.

4.2.4. The Approach Is Guided by Three Overarching Questions

The approach signifies one single pathway with three guiding questions. Figure 2 represents the guiding questions for addressing the content of a Religious Education curriculum. The three questions are: (i) "Who are we as Catholics and what is our mission?" (ii) "What do we believe?" and (iii) "How do we practice?" These questions are also identified in Figure 2. They are intended to help religious educators interrogate Catholic content. For example, the religious educators may use the questions as social constructs for categorising and positioning essential vocabulary and concepts relevant and according to the beliefs and practices of the Church. The process may lead to improved connections between language and concepts. Improved connections may foster better understandings of how Scripture and Tradition contribute to the identity and mission of the Church.

4.2.5. The Approach Builds Religious Literacy

The approach helps religious educators, their students, and potentially other members of their school communities to build spiritual and religious capacity in terms of common language, understandings, and appreciation of the Gospel message. The aim is to build spiritual and religious capabilities via critical thinking and dialogue (Robinson and Hackett 2022; Rymarz et al. 2021). Through professional formation, guided by inquiry and the Judging Standards in Religious Education, the essential spiritual and religious vocabulary and concepts about the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church are identified, defined, explained, and, hopefully, applied (Poncini 2023). Relevant concepts include the structure and contents of the Bible, and specifically, the Gospels; prayer; the celebration of the sacraments, the Mass, and other liturgies; and the Commandments and the Beatitudes as laws and moral virtues for Christian living. Improved religious literacy may lead to richer dialogue and discussion among religious educators and their students (National Catholic Education Commission 2018).

Figure 2. Guiding questions for interrogating Catholic content.

4.2.6. The Approach Aims to Continue the Legacy

The proposed approach invites religious educators on a reflective journey to rediscover who God is and what role they play in the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church. The approach is very much Christ-centred and focused on continuing God's legacy. For Christians, the legacy is a narrative about the revelation of God's promise of salvation (Vatican Council II 1965b). The narrative began with creation and was fulfilled when the Son of God came to share in the passion of mankind. The narrative continues as followers of Christ choose to share in the passion of mankind with God (Convery et al. 2021). Therefore, Christians (and, for the purpose of this paper, religious educators) have a significant responsibility to uphold God's legacy by seeking and enacting God's presence in

the world and helping others to do the same. The emphasis is moving from a transactional focus on knowledge, skills, and practices that may at times appear to try to manage, control, and influence others, to the forging of quality relationships that sustain life-long flourishing (Cullen 2017). The reflective practices as advocated in this approach attune to the secular educational approaches that value continuous improvement and growth (Caldwell 2018; Department of Education 2018) and aim to build cultural learning and transformation based on common understandings and collaboration (Fullan and Quinn 2016). The added advantage is a reawakening of the Gospel message as the true meaning and purpose of life.

5. Conclusions

Religious Education as a learning area is complex. The learning area has associated spiritual, religious, and educational dimensions and is impacted by cultural and social issues. Religious educators working in Catholic schools have a significant role to play in implementing Religious Education curricula. This paper addresses a research problem focused on providing curriculum support for religious educators. The level of support proposed is fit for purpose. That is, the support addresses and responds to findings and recommendations from research and anecdotal feedback provided by religious educators about their perceptions of the nature and role of Religious Education. Referred to as RECALL, the support is an invitation for religious educators to enter a simple, but not simplistic, research-led approach that draws from the Catholic intellectual tradition and a holistic and pragmatic philosophy of education. The approach utilises educational inquiry-based and standards-based principles. The principles form the grounds for four theoretical considerations and three guiding questions. The questions aim to help religious educators interrogate the beliefs and practices of the Catholic faith as revealed through Scripture and Tradition and presented in Religious Education curricula as mandated content. The approach is relational and community-minded, intended to build spiritual and religious literacy and capabilities. In turn, the quality of student learning and the application of that learning may benefit. Furthermore, if the Gospel message, which is the cornerstone of the Catholic Faith Tradition and is indeed "precious", as Saint Paul reminds Christians, religious educators may be in a better position to pass on the legacy by establishing better understanding of, connections with, and appreciation of the identity and mission of the Catholic Church.

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Religious Education in Australia: The Voices of Practitioners and Scholars

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Abstract: Religious education (RE) in Australia is challenged to support the religious and spiritual needs of Australia's religiously plural student population. Within a national colloquium, practitioners and scholars (N = 57) gathered to discern ways forward in RE. Data were collected from small and whole group discussions reported across three days of integrated reflection on themes of Awaken, Celebrate, and Imagine. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and Leximancer were used to analyse the respective data which confirmed domains of focus on Day 1 of Formation, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Partnerships, and Research. Day 2 (Celebrate) explored these domains and identified Themes and Theoretical Propositions that advanced each domain. Day 3 (Imagine) underlined foundations in faith for each domain and detailed generic propositions and themes. Propositions included advancing RE through Formation (being attentive to personal readiness, curriculum intention, and school identity), Pedagogy (engaging practices of inquiry, experiential learning, and encounter-based opportunities), Curriculum (characterised as inclusive, relevant, and life-giving), Partnerships (strengthening inclusion and engagement with family, parish, and community), and Research (integrating evidence-based practice).

Keywords: Australia; Catholic; religious education; plurality; theoretical propositions; practitioners and scholars

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Context

Catholic schools in Australia are distinct faith-based institutions classified by the Commonwealth and State governments as non-government schools. These schools offer parents and caregivers an alternative in education, grounded in justice and resource allocation, to support high-quality education informed by a faith tradition with the purposes of advancing integral human development and community flourishing. Catholic schools are inclusive, striving to meet national education goals and expectations from the government, the Church, and the community. Within legislative, statutory, and Church frameworks, these faith-based schools prioritise integrating educational theory and practice, developing quality curriculum programs, and fostering inclusive school cultures. This involves addressing curriculum preferences, religious dimensions, and the diverse religious affiliations and practices of staff and students.

1.2. Sector Profile

The 2021 Australian census revealed a significant shift in religious demographics: Christians now comprise 43.9% of the population, down from 52.2% in 2016. The Catholic community, specifically, has declined to 19.9% from 22.6% in 2016. Overall, 60.3% of Australians associate with a religion, while 38.9% report 'no religion' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

Currently, four million students are enrolled in Australian schools, with the majority in government schools (2.6 million, 66%), followed by Catholic schools (0.7 million, 18.2%)

and independent schools (0.6 million, 16%) (Independent Schools Australia 2021). Catholic school enrolments peaked at 19.3% in 2013 but have since declined to 18.2% (Independent Schools Australia 2021).

The religious profile of students and staff in Catholic schools has evolved. The National Catholic Education Commission (2016) states that 69% of students are Catholic, while 31% are from other religious backgrounds. In Catholic secondary schools, 33% of students are of other faith traditions or no tradition compared to 29% in primary schools. Among staff, 80% of primary and 61% of secondary school teachers identify as Catholic, though only 25% of these engage in regular worship and parish leadership (National Catholic Education Commission 2016). Data representing Catholic schools administered by Arch/Diocesan governing authorities indicate that 58.3% of students and 70.8% of teachers in 2023 are Catholic. This dramatic and evolving demographic shift raises questions about the ability of staff to support the school's mission of integral human development and community flourishing within a faith tradition (Congregation for Catholic Education 1997; National Catholic Education Commission 2018; Sultmann and Hall 2022) in a context where student enrolments demonstrate an increase in religious pluralism and or no religious affiliations. This challenge is particularly evidenced in the curriculum domain of religious education.

1.3. Research and Practice Trajectories

Religious education (RE) in Catholic schools faces unique challenges influenced by global trends towards inclusivity, pluralism, and secularism. Traditionally, RE aimed to foster lifelong faith among Catholics. However, the evolving student and staff profiles now reflect a broader community service model and an emphasis on academic achievement (Barnes 2022; Wodon 2021).

International research highlights varying contexts for the teaching of RE, each of which possesses their own challenges. For example, in the Netherlands, religious identity in schools is contested due to diverse social and religious perspectives (van Dijk-Groeneboer 2019). In Germany, confessional RE is mandated, but increasing religious diversity has led to alternative ethics courses for non-participating students (Barb 2019). The US mandates the teaching of world religions within history and geography courses to enhance religious literacy and intercultural understanding, though these are critiqued for their superficiality and insufficient teacher training (National Council for the Social Studies 2017; Barb 2019). In the UK, RE faces sustainability and marginalisation issues, with debates on whether to revise traditional models or develop new disciplinary approaches (Barnes 2020). Despite these challenges, RE's role in fostering a tolerant, cohesive society remains crucial (Barnes 2014). Effective RE curricula should integrate educational soundness, social support, and the school's historical and traditional context (Braten 2021).

Balancing long-held religious practices with diverse cultures and worldviews requires viewing RE as a process, with teachers acting as companions to students in theological reflection and dialogue (Roebben 2021; Pollefeyt 2013). It is argued that contemporary RE initiatives emphasise correlation, inclusion, interpretation, character education, narration, performance, and spirituality (Roebben 2021). Key to this transition are practices ensuring policy alignment, academic rigour, and contextual stability (Skeie 2021). Rossiter (2018) calls for a rethinking of RE to address changing religious practices, social pluralism, institutional shifts, and psychological constructs. This requires a comprehensive framework that respects tradition while responding to social and educational needs.

The curriculum in Catholic schools aims to meet individual, social, and community needs, guided by principles of equity and excellence (Education Council 2019). The NCEC interprets these principles through Christ-centred goals (National Catholic Education Commission 2018). Contemporary RE must authentically present the Good News in relevant and innovative ways (Roebben 2019). The International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV) underscores the need for a fresh language for faith, realistic practices, recognition of diversity, and alignment with human rights (Francis 2023; Grumme 2023; Skeie 2023; Kuusisto 2023; ter Avest et al. 2023). Against this backdrop, a national

gathering was held to explore the current state of religious education in Australia, focusing on ways forward in religious education that recognised the intentions and achievements of historical efforts while being open and reflective to renewing RE that addresses the needs of a religiously plural or non-engaged student population.

1.4. Perspectives of Practitioners and Scholars

Catholic school identity is rooted in the Gospel, Church traditions, and community engagement. The school operates under the guidance of the Magisterium and local Church authority in maintaining their Gospel and ecclesial traditions within the curriculum and community life that they experience (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022). The process of engagement and reflection and engagement is characterised as one of coming together and being open and informed by the Spirit. The adoption of the principle of synodality is a public expression of the work of the Spirit guiding deliberations and reflective processes. The concept of synodality combines the processes of coming together (*syn*) and being open to the presence of the Spirit (*hodos*). It is an inductive way of 'discovering with amazement that the Holy Spirit always surprises us, suggesting fresh paths and new ways of speaking' (Arbuckle 2024, p. 101). Synodality is based on respectful listening, collegiality in intention, shared beliefs as a basis of solidarity, and participation underpinned by dialogue.

> The twin actions of encounter and dialogue act as a bridge for multicultural and multifaith perspectives in a pluralistic society. Every Christian is called to go out to others—to dialogue with those who do not think the way they do, with those who have another faith, or who don't have faith. To encounter all, because we all have in common our having been created in the image of God. We can go out to encounter everyone without fear (Pope Francis reported in Reese 2013, para. 2).

And,

> Dialogue is the interaction between people where each aims to present themselves authentically and seeks to understand the other as they truly are, forming an I-Thou relationship. This relationship is characterised by mutuality, openness, and directness. The 'I' relates to the 'Thou' not as something to be studied, measured, or manipulated, but as an irreplaceable presence that responds to the 'I' in its individuality (Arbuckle 2024, p. 101).

The purpose of the national gathering was to dialogue on the status and opportunities for advancing religious education in Catholic schools across Australia. The overall theme was ways forward in religious education, with sub-themes of identifying challenges and future directions, embracing opportunities, and imagining possibilities. The process was envisioned as sharing perspectives supportive of an imagination for RE that was attentive to the diversity and circumstances of all students. In addition, changes in community and parent expectations, pedagogy, curriculum, and technology situate RE in a context which highlights the advantages of collaborative partnerships, collective reflection, and strategic intention in service and communion of a common mission. The overall aim of the national gathering was therefore the exploration of RE through drawing upon the collective expertise of practitioners and scholars in the field. The three research questions were:

1. What are the dominant themes in RE?
2. What is affirmed in the existing practices of RE?
3. What future can be imagined for RE?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The national gathering brought together scholars and practitioners (N = 57) across Australia. Invitations were extended to prospective contributors to participate in the process and make presentations on best practice in RE. Nineteen Catholic authorities were represented together with academics from Australian Catholic University (ACU), Executive

Directors and Senior Officers of Arch/Diocesan systems, governors of Religious Institutes and Ministerial Public Juridic Authorities, and representatives of the National Catholic Education Commission, Faith Formation, and Religious Education Committee.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The colloquium featured five keynote presentations, 20 elective workshops, focus group discussions, and individual and group reporting sessions. Field notes recorded lectures and workshop presentations, and recordings of small and large group discussions and individual written responses provided a basis for summative analyses. In addition, social and informal professional opportunities facilitated rich exchanges, discussion, and the development of trust, confidence, and interdependence among participants. These experiences nurtured group cohesion and provided a basis for open and forthright contributions.

Summative data were examined initially through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Hall and Sultmann 2020[1]) and subsequently though Leximancer, the focus of this paper. IPA comprises three steps: (a) data observations; (b) generating thematic titles; and (c) connecting themes through an integrating principle. Leximancer analysis was used to identify levels of emphasis within the qualitative data as measured in frequencies (hits), to identify the extent of overlapping of concepts within major themes, and as a mechanism to validate the IPA process (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of research method.

Themes and Days	Awaken Day 1	Embrace Day 2	Imagine Day 3
Research Questions	What are the dominant themes in RE?	What is affirmed in the existing practices of RE?	What future can be imagined for RE?
Data Collection	• Whole group and workshop presentations • Small group discussion • Individual reflection and reporting	• Whole group and workshop presentations • Small group discussions of nominated themes • Reporting on themes	• Whole group and workshop presentations • Small group discussions • Inspirations and remaining questions
Data Analysis	Analysis of participant responses using IPA and Leximancer.	Thematic emphases and relationships using IPA and Leximancer.	Advancing theoretical propositions to inform future directions

3. Results

3.1. Day 1: Awaken

The aim of Day 1 was to establish an awareness of the contemporary context of RE in Australia. The integration of participant reflections of Day 1 involved three steps. Step one: Individual reflection on three promptings: 'existing and emerging challenges;' 'new awakenings and future directions;' and 'other comments.' Step two: Participants were invited to offer a brief comment to the wider group and to share their more detailed written responses with the planning group. Thirty-eight individual responses were collected and collated. Step three: All members of the planning team and an invited consultant examined the 38 shared responses.

3.1.1. Interpreting the Verbal Data

Through a random allocation of individual written responses, each planning team reviewer examined responses and recorded themes of interest. Main Ideas were aggregated and shared as a summary of the overall data. Discussion and clarification of Main Ideas led to the postulation of summary Themes, and these were integrated within an overall domain for more detailed attention (Table 2). Four dominant domains of interest were identified: formation; pedagogy and curriculum; parent and parish partnerships; and research. Each domain possessed aspects of uniqueness and interdependence, with a total of 20 themes being articulated across the four domains: formation (seven), pedagogy and curriculum (seven), parents/parish/partnerships (three), and research (three).

Table 2. IPA analysis of aggregated respondent commentary (Awaken) on the nature of RE in Australia.

Main Ideas	Themes	Domains
More experiential and inquiry approach to RE . . . reconsideration of what we do in senior RE.	Senior schooling	Pedagogy and Curriculum
What exactly is expected of an RE teacher in a RE classroom in a Catholic school today, both primary and secondary?	Consensus on purpose of RE	
Formation of our teachers and parents in Catholic Education is key. Celebrate and share our successes more overtly and encourage best practice.	Professional learning	
We need to model the radical inclusion of Jesus and ensure everyone can find a place of comfort, solace, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and mercy when they are part of Catholic Education	Community for all	
The vital importance of RE teachers being able to sensitively listen to students and engage them with inquiry into 'the big questions' with sophistication in drawing upon/connection with the tradition.	Voices of youth	
There are so many points of congruence between us, along with some significant and productive collaboration, but we have never achieved a National RE curriculum. This continues to result in duplication and inefficient use of resources. This matter is still worth pursuing.	National curriculum and resourcing	
Embedding a Catholic world view across the curriculum; improve quality classroom teaching of religion; and encourage an encounter with Jesus in the religious life of the school.	RE and Catholic school identity	
Invitation—proposing not imposing; the critical need to differentiate the faith encounter. RE teachers need to be supported in their intrinsic spirituality and their self-efficacy.	Teacher evangelisation	Formation
We need to awaken the witness factor in our younger RE teachers and undergraduate RE students.	Teacher formation	
It's not good enough to have well-meaning, 'generally spiritual' people in the religious education space when we are trying to draw secondary school students into experiences where they can encounter Christ.	Witness	
What form of RE curriculum/pedagogy is responsive to our context and equips young people to dialogue with a pluralist/secular society?	Holistic engagement	
We need a critical mass of staff who passionately engage and promote Catholic identity of the school.	Critical mass	
How do we ensure RE enhances the identity of everyone in our schools—'fullness of life' for all?	Catholic identity	
Recognising that we do God's work and that union with God is critical in the work of religious education.	Embracing	
Catholic schools have something to offer Catholics (the Church) and, potentially, many others (who send their children) and the broader society.	School as engagement	Parents/ Parish/ Partnerships
Listen to parents and their opinions (families are the most important influence). Increase our efforts in the formation of parents.	Parent engagement	
The importance of parish life in renewing/refashioning to engage with people's lives and respect the agency of all the baptised.	Complement-arity in mission	
The La Salle Academy important for new research and providing resources to advance this cause.	ACU partnerships	Research
More work needs to be done on what makes for effective faith formation of students in Catholic schools.	Quality practices	
An effective and efficient way of collaborating will be the development of contemporary resources that support the teaching of religious education. This needs to be well informed by research aligned to contemporary pedagogies.	Quality resources needed	

3.1.2. Mapping Themes and Relationships

Leximancer was used to analyse the overall transcripts of reports and identify the nature and extent of responses in terms of their 'hits' and the relationships between the identified domains, themes, and main ideas. Leximancer outputs entailed four dominant areas of focus: Formation (137 hits), RE (39 hits), People (35 hits), and Work (8 hits). The interpretation of the Leximancer concept map (see Figure 1) confirmed domains of RE (Curriculum and Pedagogy), which appears larger in the concept map due to its co-occurrence with other concepts, and domains of Formation, People, and Work, which align with the IPA analysis of Formation, Parents/Parish/Partnerships, and Research, respectively. The clustering of the themes graphically presents the extent of overlap and interdependence of the domains, and, while the expression of RE is wide and unspecified, closer inquiry reveals that the two dominant elements are curriculum and pedagogy. In summary, Leximancer, coupled with IPA, provides confidence in the identification of the high priority domains of interest in RE as entailing Formation, Pedagogy, Curriculum, Partnerships, and Research.

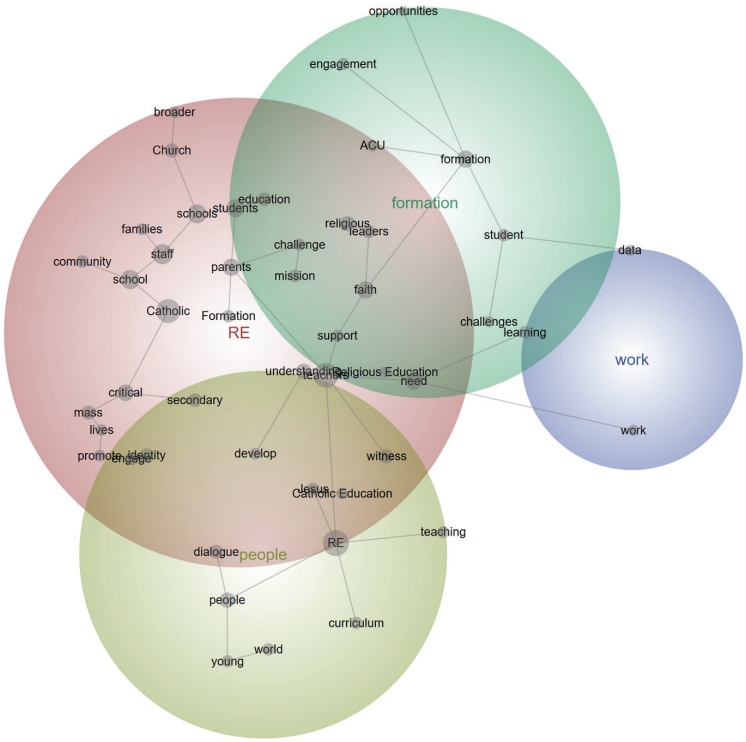

Figure 1. Concept map of aggregated respondent commentary (Awaken) on the nature of RE in Australia.

3.2. Day 2: Celebrate

Participants were invited to consider the domains of interest from Day 1 together with the emerging insights from the workshops, keynote presentations, and ongoing national gathering dialogue. The process involved the following: (1) selection of a focus group discussion on a dimension of interest; (2) engaging in a discussion as to what is working well and is effective, what challenges continue, and what are some emerging ideas within a vision for the future; and (3) recording and sharing personal and group deliberations. Each focus group reported on its deliberations, with some submitting multiple reports reflective of the breadth of dialogue.

Two reviewers analysed the reports of all five focus group domains of interest by reviewing each workshop response, summarising the responses, and categorising comments according to the three questions posed within each of the domains of interest on Day 2: (1) What is effective? (2) What is challenging? (3) What might widen the vision?

The subsequent analysis comprised two elements: the IPA analysis of the summary reports on the collective small group discussions (see Table 3) and the Leximancer analysis of the overall response transcripts (see Figure 2).

Table 3. Participant responses to the three questions as to the nature of RE in Australia.

Effective	Challenging	Visioning
Pedagogy Themes		
1. Research 2. Accreditation 3. Specialisation recognition 4. Multi-faith context 5. Pedagogy of encounter 6. Rich dialogue 7. Encounter with Christ	1. Witness 2. Skills of RE teachers 3. Accreditation 4. Pedagogy, assessment, content, and reporting nexus 5. Sharing good practice 6. Catering for diversity 7. Encounter	1. Educational principles 2. Action research 3. Sustainable professional learning 4. Graduate expectations 5. Strategic engagement 6. Partnerships 7. Digitalisation
Principle: Advancing an inquiring, experiential, encounter-based pedagogy.		
Formation Themes		
1. Priority of RE curriculum 2. Partnerships in provision 3. Dialogue 4. Credibility of formators 5. Integral to school mission 6. Critical time	1. Clarification of identity 2. Disconnect of faith and life 3. Strategies articulation 4. Formator capacity building 5. Personal Integration 6. Quality of resourcing 7. Diversity in faiths	1. Technology 2. Collaboration 3. Faith life integration 4. Mandated guidelines 5. Parish connection 6. Leadership
Principle: Advancing formation for personal identity and school mission.		
Curriculum Themes		
1. Understanding ECSI data 2. Curriculum and context awareness 3. Best practice 4. Creativity with Senior RE 5. Teacher preparation	1. Formation for mission 2. Catering for diversity 3. Professional learning 4. Personal identity 5. Purpose of RE 6. Witness	1. Exemplars of good practice 2. Evidence-based practice 3. Multi-faith and multi-cultural context
Principle: Advancing curriculum which is inclusive, relevant, inquiring, and life-giving.		
Parents/Parish/Partnership Themes		
1. Interesting initiatives in some dioceses 2. Parish sacramental programs	1. A common language 2. Role of family, school, parish 3. Parent involvement 4. Imbalance of resourcing	1. Honouring the contributions of stakeholders 2. Inclusiveness beyond 'Father' and 'Principal'
Principle: Honouring inclusion and engagement with family, parish, and community.		
Research Themes		
1. Starting point—questions of the students and teachers 'being attentive to reality 2. Research projects undertaken in various dioceses, including collaboration with ACU	1. Linking RE/theology as an academic exercise with faith experience and formation 2. An evidentiary platform for practice 3. National resource bank 4. Appropriate budget 5. Faith within Science	1. Long-term planning 2. Formation of teachers 3. Accountability via research 4. Digital connections 5. Best practice lighthouses 6. Philanthropic support 7. Centre for Academic Research 8. Publication/s for learning
Principle: Advancing research which identifies needs, informs practice, and monitors outcomes.		

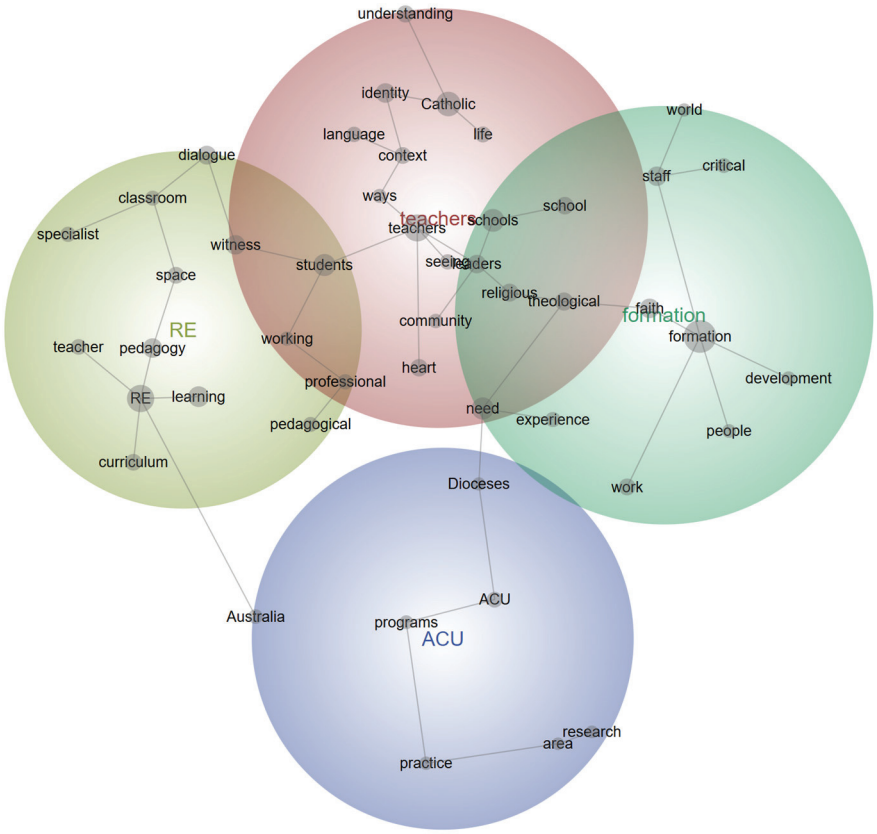

Figure 2. Concept map of aggregated respondent commentary (Celebrate) on the transcripts recorded during Day 2.

The IPA summarised the domains of interest through the application of a series of integrating principles for each (Table 3), and the Leximancer process confirmed that the themes constituting the principle were validated as representative of the original transcripts and indicative of the significance of the domains. The concept map (Figure 2) indicated that RE (32 hits) focused on aspects of teaching and learning, teachers (24 hits) identified the relationship of teachers to the curriculum, formation (47 hits) represented the complexity and importance of professional learning, and ACU (10 hits) addressed the notion of research as integral to RE development and delivery. Moreover, the concept map illustrated the overlap of the dimensions of interest and pointed to a wholistic set of interventions and practices that would advance RE.

3.3. Day 3: Imagine

Participants in Day 3 were invited to reflect on the findings of Day 1 which focused on the contemporary nature of RE (Awaken) and on the findings of Day 2 (Celebrate) which focused on the detailed reflection on the key domains of RE generated in Day 1. Participants were asked to nominate one inspirational comment that accompanied the discussion of RE and one question that remained unanswered; these nominations were presented across the range of jurisdictions represented at the gathering.

The responses that inspired were centred in the faith foundations for RE. The centrality of Catholic faith within Catholic schools was made abundantly clear with key elements of Formation being centred in Christ, Tradition, Mission, and Faith Journey; Pedagogy situated in terms of discipleship, dialogue, inquiry, and witness; Curriculum as inclusive, founded on encounter and identity, re-contextualised and creative; Research as underpinning awareness and basis for change and accountability; and Partnerships as imperative in enabling a space for the Spirit of God to flourish and be experienced. Responses were also subjected to a Leximancer analysis. Emphasis was granted to themes of the heart (hits,

23), enabling others (hits, 14), dialogue (hits, 6), and change (hits, 4) (See Figure 3). As shown, the essence of RE is centred in a heart perspective which incorporates people and the school community experiencing a changing phenomenon supported by dialogue.

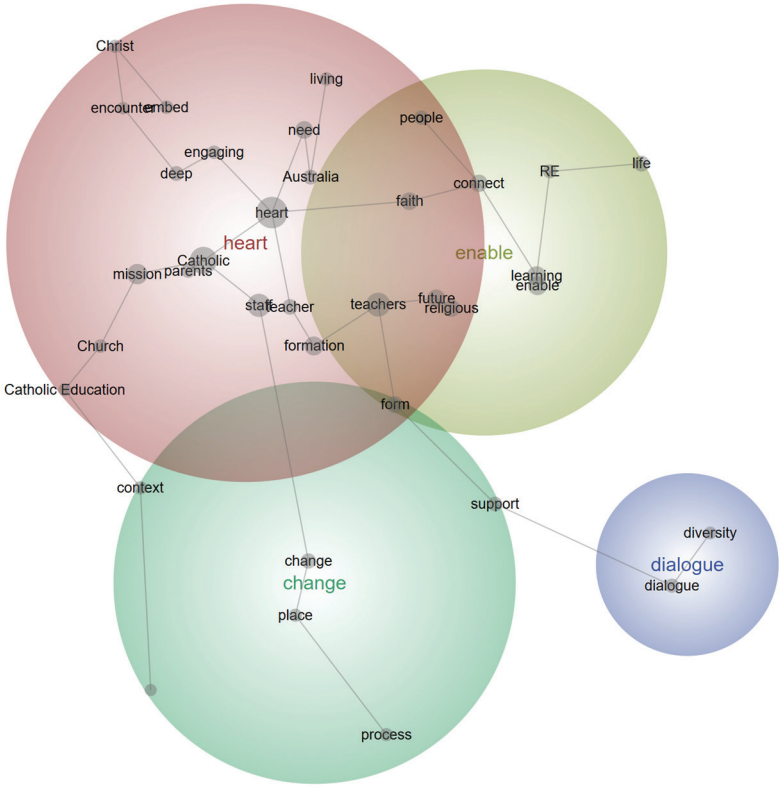

Figure 3. Concept map of participant responses to inspirations and questions in RE.

RE was emphatically recorded as underpinned by foundations identified in respondent summary comments. Formation: the centrality of Christ and the journey of individuals was seen to be critical as it 'engages the heart and hand of teachers, leaders and parents in a deep and nourishing vision of Catholic mission'. Pedagogy was seen as more than good teaching, for it involves the 'meaningful construction through structured encounters with others'. Curriculum is learning that supports 'the whole person is engaged—head, heart, body and will'. Partnerships engage people and structures within and beyond the classroom that mirror 'shared commitment, shared questions, open and responsive'. Research is carried out to elucidate; 'staff and students know that "change" is needed, but do not know what that "change" is?'

4. Discussion

The national gathering of practitioners and scholars sought to support awareness, reflection, and imagination for best practice in RE. It was not a conference in the traditional sense, but a process of engagement through dialogue. The process was shaped by its intentions and the experience, wisdom, and generosity of those who accepted the invitation to be present to one another and the fundamental curriculum of RE. Notwithstanding these parameters, the overall planning and purpose of the national gathering, together with the profile of participants, enabled substantial expertise to be applied. The discussion of proceedings and outcomes across three integrated days gave rise to theoretical propositions that provide a basis for strategies that advance RE.

4.1. Theoretical Propositions

The theoretical propositions that emerged from the national sharing are the fruits of dialogue and the analysis of reflections by a group of educators within a defined experience.

While not comprehensive, prescriptive, or definitive, the process and content of the national gathering provided a basis for the following main ideas and theoretical proposition associated with each of the five domains of interest identified as characteristic of RE in the Catholic school. Attention to these domains, the main ideas that populate them and theoretical propositions that are generated provide the platform for advancing religious education within an Australian context. They include:

4.1.1. Formation

Main Ideas: Technology, collaboration, faith/life integration, mandated guidelines, parish connection, and leadership.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing formation for RE which is attentive to personal readiness, curriculum intention, and school identity.

4.1.2. Pedagogy

Main Ideas: Educational principles, action research, sustainability, graduate expectations, strategic engagement, partnerships, and digitalisation

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE teaching through practices which incorporate inquiry, experiential learning, and encounter-based opportunities.

4.1.3. Curriculum

Main Ideas: Exemplars of good practice, evidence-based practice, and multi-faith and multi-cultural engagement.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE curriculum which is inclusive, relevant, and life-giving.

4.1.4. Partnerships

Main Ideas: School community engagement, parent engagement, and complementarity in mission.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE through inclusion and engagement with family, parish, and community.

4.1.5. Research

Main Ideas: Planning, accountability, best practice, resourcing support, centre for research, and publications.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE through evidence-based practice.

4.2. Strategies

The practical application of the theoretical propositions was summarised in strategic terms through participants voicing practical strategies as to future directions. With due recognition to responsibilities of the respective authorities, participants echoed the following directional recommendations:

Formation: Confirming forums for sharing and networking and integrating faith experience and theology.
Pedagogy: Dialogue in promoting RE method and nurturing teacher dispositions of moderator, specialist, and witness.
Curriculum: Engaging teacher formation in a diverse set of skills and including school-based leaders of RE at future national gatherings.
Partnerships: Strengthening communication between ACU and Catholic education authorities and including partners who collaborate with schools (e.g., parents, parishes, spiritual movements and associations, and dioceses).
Research: Gathering quality data, learning from and applying the findings, and ensuring that meaning and communications are critical to ongoing effective learning.

While not exhaustive, these trends and influences are evidenced in the religious education curriculum in Western and European settings. From this perspective, it is helpful

to note the ongoing importance of the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools* (Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2007). These guiding principles promote greater understanding of the world's increasing religious diversity.

Building on the Toledo guiding principles, it is also important to note the significance of the Rainier Economic Development Council (REDCo) project that was funded by the European Union between 2006 and 2009 which investigated the contribution that the study of religion can make to improving understanding of the role of religion in the public square. Scholars from eight European countries participated in the project which focused on 14 to 16 year-old students. As Weisse (2011) notes, one of the key findings of the REDCo project was that 'the school has a central role to play in promoting learning about and from religions' (p. 118). This finding highlights the importance of creating a genuine curriculum and an associated pedagogical/dialogical space in the classroom that addresses religious plurality.

The changing profile of the Catholic school community in Australia invites a response to RE which is attentive to tradition, inclusive, and meaningful for all. Underpinned by faith foundations, the experience of RE is challenged to make a difference through alignment with the distinctive faith-based philosophy of the school and the dominant domains and themes nominated by practitioners and scholars as significant. The research trajectory for RE might not only review the current state of RE but also grant attention to innovative programs that shed light on the experience, reflection, and wisdom of commentators.

The national gathering, Ways Forward in Religious Education, reflects the continuing renewal of Catholic schools within the mission of the Church in Australia. For some authorities and participants, the 'fruits' of the national gathering offer expanded horizons, while for others, established and familiar pathways were validated. In this regard, the national gathering experience was one of mutual sharing in the advancement of a mission. This paper is just one indication of the quality of religious education renewal within the mission and ministry of the Catholic school in Australia. It will complement and support the continuing dialogue and creativity that constitutes religious education within Catholic schools and systems.

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Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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Notes

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Student Priorities for Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes in Senior Secondary Religious Education: An Australian Perspective

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Abstract: This paper reports on one part of a larger longitudinal empirical study (2021–2023) that responds to the call for Religious Education (RE) to address religious plurality in the context of senior Catholic schooling within an Australian Archdiocese where students represent multiple faith traditions or no traditions. The research focuses on the level of satisfaction by students across Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes within a new and innovative senior school curriculum, Religion Meaning and Life (RML) based on national RE guidelines. Participants included 276 students across 17 schools who completed an online survey with 32 of these students participating in focus group interviews. Data analysis of quantitative data was both descriptive and inferential, and qualitative data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Topics of most interest were Ethics and Other World Religions; pedagogies entailing dialogue and use of media and technologies were rated highly; and learning outcomes entailed awareness of school mission, the religious dimension of the school, and pastoral care. Inferential statistical analyses confirm four core topics, pedagogies, and outcomes as significant to levels of satisfaction and in combination accounted for 42% of the variance of satisfaction with RML. Theoretical propositions for what matters most in senior secondary RE were advanced through four integrating principles (educational, formative, social, communitarian) and practice implications that preference Catholic tradition, and reference religious plurality.

Keywords: Australia; Catholic; religious education; students; senior secondary; curriculum innovation

1. Introduction

Educators in Catholic schools recognise the significant role that Religious Education plays in the curriculum. They are also aware of the ongoing religious and social changes within the school community that necessitate continual evaluation of what matters most in Religious Education, particularly for students. The ongoing challenge is to integrate RE theory and practice within high-quality curriculum programs that consider inclusive practices, curriculum preferences, student agency, and the diversity of religious affiliations and faith practices. These considerations are increasingly important for students in their final years of schooling as they mature, search for meaning, and develop the competence to operate independently and relationally. Curriculum practices often reflect these imperatives by incorporating community expectations and new understandings of mission practice relationships.

Catholic schools are built upon a unique model and vision that fosters a sense of community and shared values. At the heart of this model is the example set by Jesus, whose teachings emphasise the importance of justice, peace, liberation, and compassion as the foundation for authentic human existence.[1] Educators in Catholic schools strive not only to embody these principles in their professional practices and personal witness but also to cultivate these qualities in their students. As stated by the Congregation for Catholic

Education (CCE 1977) in 1977, "The Catholic school is committed thus to the development of the whole person, since in Christ, the perfect human, all human values find their fulfilment and unity" (para. 32). Consequently, the mission of Catholic schools in Australia is to facilitate the holistic development of individuals and communities, guided by the Gospel of Christ (NCEC 2018) while referencing other traditions in formal curriculum offerings.[2]

1.1. The Catholic School and Religious Education

The significance of mission within Catholic schools is described by the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) as: "the young people we are educating today will become the leaders of the 2050s" (CCE 2014). To this end, the Congregation asks:

> What will religion's contribution be to educating younger generations to peace, development, fraternity in the universal human community? How are we going to educate them to faith and in faith? How will we establish the preliminary conditions to accept this gift, to educate them to gratitude, to a sense of awe, to asking themselves questions, to develop a sense of justice and consistency? How will we educate them to prayer? (n. III)

Within Australia, Religious Education is viewed as a formal curriculum area within the mission of the school and is responsive to social, ecclesial, and educational contexts (National Catholic Education Commission, NCEC (2018), Introduction). The goal of Religious Education is to "expand students' spiritual awareness and religious identity, fostering their capacities and skills of discerning, interpreting, thinking critically, seeking truth and making meaning. It inspires and challenges their service to others and engagement in the Church and the world" (NCEC 2018, p. 7)

The provision of Religious Education curriculum is heavily influenced by the unique context in which it is delivered. Each educational setting is shaped by its own distinct history, priorities, political landscape, and legislative framework, as well as the evolving expectations and demographics of the community it serves. As Barnes (2014) points out, "One cannot talk about Religious Education in the abstract but only about particular forms of RE, and these forms differ greatly from country to country" (p. 4).

The nature of Religious Education, across different contexts is also made complex by definitions as to what might be included in Religious Education. In this light, a report published by the Australian National University (Singleton et al. 2019) explored the changing role of religion in society and its relationship with the younger generation. The study shows that 52% of individuals aged 13–18 do not identify with any formal religious affiliation. However, the report also highlights that 74% of Australian teenagers hold a generally positive view of religion, and while they may not be affiliated with a specific faith, they remain receptive to various forms of spirituality. They note that 67% of Australian adolescents believe in some form of transcendent reality beyond themselves, and an additional 9%, although uncertain, are open to considering this possibility. These trends are further supported by recent findings from McCrindle (2021), which indicate that despite a decline in cultural Christianity, Australia as a nation remains spiritual. This can be attributed, in part, to the country's growing cultural diversity and the influx of other faiths through migration.

1.2. The Evolving Nature of Religious Education

Rossiter (2021) emphasises the crucial role of Religious Education in helping learners develop a sense of meaning, purpose, and values. To achieve these objectives, Religious Education functions as both an academic discipline and a field of research, operating in connection with its Catholic Tradition while remaining responsive to the needs and characteristics of the learning community it serves. Rossiter (2022) further elaborates on this position in a systematic review of the development and emphases in Religious Education in Australia from 1960 to 2022. The review clarifies the "relationships between Religious Education and young people's personal development" (p. 22) and argues that Religious Education can have a significant impact on personal growth. In this context,

Rossiter proposes "a need to recalibrate the expectations of Religious Education with a more appropriate and realistic account of its role as a school subject that can resource the spirituality and development of young people through the knowledge and skills it can impart" (p. 22).

Rossiter identifies a range of "best practice" strategies (p. 20) and highlights the importance of context, the challenge of perceptions about Religious Education, the significance of teacher beliefs and skills, and the relevance of pedagogy and content, particularly in the senior years of schooling. These conclusions are not presented in isolation but rather draw from the rich and engaging history of Religious Education, which has been responsive to needs and influences while remaining faithful to Church Tradition (Rossiter 1999; Crawford and Rossiter 2006). Religious Education is imperative when considering inclusive practices, religious diversity within the classroom, and the necessity of professional practice to ensure quality and consistency. According to Rossiter, this approach to Religious Education in the context of personal development helps:

> . . . religion teachers clarify what they are trying to accomplish in both the short and long terms. It helps give perspective, purpose, and direction to their teaching. It helps shape reasonable and realistic expectation of what can be achieved in the classroom, and of what is respected as the private inner workings of young people's minds that are not open to scrutiny. It can affect their choice of content and methods, as well as the questions they ask of students in class, and the sorts of responses they would like to get. It can help them evaluate various theories of Religious Education as well as discern where expectations and practice may be inappropriate and/or unrealistic. It can help them value their own teaching and their profession as religious educators (Rossiter 1999, p. 3).

The evolving focus of Religious Education reflects a shift from a singular emphasis on faith and faith practice to a more complex, dynamic, and inclusive perspective. Initially aligned with the catechetical focus of the Catholic Tradition, Religious Education in Australia has broadened its development and delivery in response to religious plurality, pedagogical innovation, and expectations of parents and caregivers. Over time, religious understanding and spirituality have become integral to life awareness and the development of ethical responses, incorporating reflection on one's experiences. Recent developments emphasise experiential learning, combining faith traditions, other world religions, and ethical practices with reflective processes.

This shift in emphasis does not dismiss progressive approaches; instead, Religious Education integrates a variety of perspectives. The evolution and application of Religious Education are now centred on pedagogies that enrich content, blend experiences, empower reflection, and foster the integration of the whole person. Educators are responsible for understanding, moderating, and reinforcing the curriculum through their witness. The combined emphasis on doctrinal and catechetical approaches, along with spiritual, existential, experiential, ethical, and collaborative reflection through dialogue, forms the foundation of the innovative senior secondary RE curriculum, *Religion*, *Meaning*, *and Life*.

1.3. A Reconceptualist Approach to Religious Education

The word "reconceptualist", coined by Kieran Scott (1984), simply means changing the way that concepts are used for interpreting or explaining something. In his article, Scott makes the point that a reconceptualized religious education builds a suspension bridge between the work of the church and the great public issues of our day. Questions of justice and peace, equality and ecology, public policy, and interpersonal relations are critical issues for both church and society. Nothing from ordinary experience, then, is beyond consideration in its curriculum. It offers a mediating language to link the rich wisdom and prophetic vision of the church to the pressing social and public concerns in the modern world.

The Reconceptualist approach within the pilot schools of this study entails an educational framework rather than a catechetical orientation. This educational framework is one

that positions Religious Education as a robust academic subject in the school curriculum with the personal/spiritual dimension accommodated within it.

> Classroom religious education is about educating young people spiritually, ethically, and religiously. It is not primarily a religious experience, but it is essentially teaching young people about religion, and about spiritual and moral issues, from a Catholic viewpoint. (Rossiter 2018, p. 1)

Similarly, Scott (1984) argues that "a reconceptualized religious education takes education as its overarching frame of reference. It self-consciously works out of an educational rather than ministerial framework". Gabriel Moran distinguishes between the classroom learning of religion and the practice of religion (Moran 1981, p. 37). He asserts that "an education that deserves to be characterised as religious would have to include two quite distinct things: (1) an understanding of religion, starting but not ending with one's own religion; and (2) access to the free and intelligent practice of a particular form of religious life" (Moran 1981, p. 21). Key to the approach are strategies of avoiding presumptive language, teaching the Tradition, and applying powerful pedagogies.

The Reconceptualist approach to Religious Education emphasises the importance of avoiding presumptive language and assumptions about students' faith development based on their religious affiliation. Instead, teachers are encouraged to use invitational and educational language to engage students in the religion classroom. By using non-presumptive language, teachers create an environment where students feel free to respond in ways that are not predetermined or programmed.

When teaching about the Catholic Christian tradition, teachers demonstrate the value they place on their own personal beliefs through their search for meaning and purpose. However, they are also challenged to maintain a critical distance between themselves and the content they are teaching, allowing space for authentic dialogue and giving students the freedom to investigate, inquire, and use their religious imagination. To achieve this, a Reconceptualist approach necessitates the use of powerful pedagogies that engage students with the rich resources of the tradition along with the volume and presentation of material on digital platforms (Pollefeyt and Richards 2019). Teachers are encouraged to acknowledge the reality of students' lives, identify their levels of thinking, and build on the unique attributes each student brings to the classroom. This involves incorporating powerful questioning techniques within a community of learners that fosters genuine, active, and authentic student engagement. The goals and outcomes of this approach include pedagogies that encompass didactic presentations, peer-to-peer learning, conversations at home, reflection, integration, and meaningful applications in formal and informal engagements. In summary, the influence of the teacher is significant as specialist, moderator, and witness.

1.4. Research Context

The data reported in this paper were part of a larger research project (Sultmann et al. 2023). The study explores the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents regarding innovative Religious Education (RE), developed, trialled, and implemented in senior secondary schools in Australia. The data presented here focus on student perceptions, particularly in the context of increasing diversity and the demand for RE experiences that reflect community expectations.

The larger study compared the outcomes of two traditional academic RE programs, *Religion and Ethics* and *Study of Religion*, with the innovative Religion Meaning and Life (RML) program (Sultmann et al. 2023). Notably, student satisfaction levels were similar across these programs, but the influences identified within each were distinct. No significant differences in the factors contributing to traditional programs were identified. However, within the RML initiative there were significant influences that gave rise to effectiveness. This paper details these findings, aiming to identify key factors in the RML program that contribute to its effectiveness and to consider potential adaptations for the content, pedagogy, and outcomes of traditional RE offerings. The research challenge is not to determine the most effective program but to explore the influences that students perceive as making

a difference. This was achieved through an exploration of the effectiveness of the RML curriculum guided by the following research questions:

1. What did students perceive to be important topics?
2. What did students perceive to be important pedagogical approaches?
3. What did students perceive as important outcomes?
4. What was the overall level of student satisfaction?
5. What combination of topics, pedagogies, and outcomes contribute to levels of satisfaction?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were drawn from those studying RML in 17 Catholic schools across two years of the project (N = 276). In both years, students completed an online survey and at the conclusion of year two of the study, 32 students participated in four semi-structured interviews.

2.2. Data Collection

The research team secured ethical clearance from Australian Catholic University and the relevant system authorities before commencing data collection. Two primary methods were employed to gather data as follows: anonymous surveys and semi-structured focus group interviews with students.

Thematic areas of interest were used to create an online survey, which was distributed to participants via an anonymous digital link on the Qualtrics platform. The intent of the survey was to gather information on the most important topics, pedagogies, and outcomes, as well as gauge overall satisfaction levels with the RML program. The questions were informed by the following three primary sources: the "Framing Paper: Religious Education in Australian Catholic schools" (NCEC 2018), the commissioning authority's RML Pilot 2020 Course Handbook, and relevant case studies from recent research (Sultmann et al. 2021a, 2021b). Participants were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the questions using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented the lowest score and 5 the highest.

To complement the survey data and gain deeper insights, the researchers conducted semi-structured focus group interviews. These interviews explored the same domains of learning as the surveys, focusing on the most significant topics, pedagogies, and outcomes.

2.3. Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyse the combined data collected from completed surveys across two years. These analyses included generating descriptive statistics, which were presented in tabular form with percentage response distribution and means. In addition to these descriptive statistics, inferential analyses were conducted to assess differences in satisfaction levels and variations within response domains where multiple items were rated differentially. For these analyses, t-tests, ANOVAs, and multiple regression analyses were used to examine the data and identify statistically significant findings.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and aligned with the first three research questions of the study. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al. 1999) was applied to all qualitative data. IPA aims to "unravel the meaning contained in narrative accounts through a process of interpretative engagement with the text of transcripts" (p. 218) by focusing on the three research questions. The process involves the following three stages: (1) data observations; (2) generating thematic titles; and (3) connecting themes through an integrating principle.

3. Results

3.1. Topics

Table 1 presents an overview of students' perceptions categorized according to Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes in the Religion Meaning and Life (RML) curriculum. The table displays the mean scores for program criteria in each of the domains of Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes. For Topics, findings suggest that Ethics (mean 3.6) and Other World Religions (mean 3.4) were the most relevant studied.

Table 1. Importance of RML by Topic, Pedagogies, and Outcomes (N = 276).

Topics		**Pedagogies**		**Outcomes**	
Criteria	**Mean**	**Criteria**	**Mean**	**Criteria**	**Mean**
Ethics	3.6	Dialogue	3.8	Listening to others	3.5
Other World Religions	3.4	Media & Technology	3.5	Dialoguing with others	3.4
Catholic Social Teaching	3.1	Solving Problems	3.4	Making connections	3.4
Jesus	3.0	Peer-to-Peer Learning	3.3	Contributing to community	3.3
God as Trinity	2.9	Applying RE	3.0	Critiquing information	3.2
Christian Traditions	2.8	Projects	2.9	Understanding myself	3.1
Prayer	2.6	Applying Scripture	2.5	Applying Catholic Teachings	2.8
Scripture	2.6	Praying	2.2	Praying	2.2
Christian life	2.6	Textbook	2.1	-	-
Church	2.5	-	-	-	-
Sacraments	2.5	-	-	-	-
Doctrines (Church Teachings)	2.4	-	-	-	-

Further insights into the importance of specific topics were gleaned from student comments, which provided a more nuanced understanding of their perspectives. Students emphasised the significance of the topic areas of Ethics and Other World Religions, viewing them as crucial components in facilitating dialogue and applying religious concepts to questions of meaning and life. Students placed great value on the transition from simply learning about a topic to actively applying that knowledge in real-world contexts.

> To me, I feel it's the morality side of things not so much the text and reading too deep into the text, but more looking at. . . you know the example that Jesus set and the modern take on that.

> Students did not perceive RML as a formal curriculum of study.

> Like I wouldn't describe it as another subject to study, but more just a chance to participate and engage in religion in a different way. Which is how, if I was selling it to someone, I would sell it in that way, like you get the chance to study a subject that you're interested in and help you moving forward after school. And you also don't lose the ability to study religion, which a lot of us here enjoyed.

> Experiential learning was important.

> You definitely do get involved in religion, and but in this amount and in an engaging way. It's definitely more helpful to be able to talk about religion. In this sense, we're not being hindered by assignments or exams surrounding religion as an [traditional Religious Education subject], 'so you really get to learn', I guess. Yeah, more important moral questions . . . And it's definitely more educational, in that sense.

3.2. Pedagogies

Table 1 also presents data on student perceptions of pedagogical approaches used in the Religion Meaning and Life (RML) curriculum. Findings suggest Dialogue to be the most effective pedagogical approach, with a mean score of 3.8. Other highly rated approaches include Media and Technology (mean 3.5), Solving Problems (mean 3.4), and

Peer-to-Peer Learning (mean 3.3). In contrast, students found Textbooks (mean 2.1) and Praying (mean 2.2) to be the least effective pedagogical approaches.

The focus group interviews yielded additional insights into the impact of various pedagogical practices on student learning and engagement. Commentary confirmed pedagogical practices of scheduling and timetabling; respectful inclusion; student agency; dialogue; teacher as witness, and assessment relevance.

Timetabling and scheduling

> RML happens every two weeks, and in the afternoons, we basically take a few hours to discuss... And we begin with a few focus questions to start up the conversation. And those can range from what are your personal beliefs to what do you think about this specific topic

Respectful inclusion

> So, in normal religion classes, it's very structured, and there's really no room to talk about what you think or your interpretations. It's mostly just analysing Scripture or, you know, that kind of thing. But in RML, it's way more open, as they said before. But it's much more welcoming, especially if you don't already like talking in front of people. If you chime in with your beliefs, it's very welcome, and it can branch into completely different conversations, which are really beneficial. And I think that's the best part of RML.

Student agency

> I feel like what you said before about the relationship between us. It's pretty good. But it's even better when you have something like [teacher's name] who's willing to share his story. And that sort of encourages us to sort of get our perspective, like he's told us a lot about growing up with religion and how that impacted his life and how his understanding of religion has grown and changed and pick the people around him. And that's, I guess, something you wouldn't get on the Internet.

Diversity of witness

> It's different for everyone, and that's probably one of the best things we've explored. We also looked at, um, how religious practises like how that has an influence on our life, I guess, like whether we're devout Catholics and we go to church every Sunday, or whether it's just something we passively engage in at school and how that differs between each of us and [teacher] included. So, I guess that's the best thing is discussing that getting to hear from different people about.

3.3. Outcomes

Table 1 also details Outcomes and findings suggest that students feel most confident in their interpersonal skills (listening, mean 3.5; dialoguing, mean 3.4), moderately confident in their critical and reflective skills (critiquing information, mean 3.2; making connections, mean 3.4; understanding myself, mean 3.1; contributing to community, mean 3.3), and less confident in applying religious practices (applying Catholic teachings, mean 2.8; praying, mean 2.2).

Developing the importance of interpersonal skills from self-reflection and community contribution, students commented on the place of religion on personal meaning and its application within a safe a learning environment.

Personal meaning

> It (studying RML) gave me the ability to choose another subject. But I also feel like I gained. It gave me an insight to what religion means on a deeper sort of level, because I got to find out what other people see in that conversation sort of atmosphere.

Application

> But what I've always liked about RML is it focuses more on the meaning. . . So, while of course, some of our activities may lead us into an environment that could resemble being in the chapel. . . Now the volunteering opportunities that we have with Catholic Mission and that kind of sphere of things, you could say that involves prayer. But in a regular session, I wouldn't describe it as being prayerful at any stage.

Safe learning environment

> We do stay after school [to do RML]. But it's a good atmosphere around here just to spend time with my friends and just to talk generally. So, it's had a good impact on my mental health. Just sitting here in a good environment. And what else have I gained from this course? Well, obviously I've strengthened my understanding on Christianity and other religions, which we all talk about here, and [teacher's] perspectives on certain topics and just everyone's opinions and everyone's beliefs. They all combine and merge together, so it allows me to have a deeper understanding of all the topics we talked about.

3.4. Overall Satisfaction and Comparisons

As displayed in Table 2, students rated RML positively, with a mean score of 3.2, indicating satisfaction above the midpoint. The educational research domains of Topics Overall, Pedagogies Overall, and Outcomes Overall revealed consistent and favourable perceptions. However, Pedagogy was rated more favourably (mean 3.5) compared to Topics Overall and Outcomes Overall (both with a mean of 3.2). Responses to Topics Overall and Outcomes Overall followed a normal distribution, but there was a notable positive inclination towards RML pedagogy. Analysis indicated that 45.3% of students were either highly satisfied (5) or satisfied (4) with the program overall. Satisfaction was higher for pedagogical processes (55.1%) than for the topics studied (43.2%). When examining the Pedagogy Overall domain, the results were similar to those related to Topics Overall. Students placed greater value on content that was communal and practical rather than purely cognitive or doctrinal. This aligns with the RML's experiential approach, which promotes dialogue about personal experiences informed by Catholic teaching and insights from other world religions. Students appreciated the opportunities for dialogue and peer-to-peer learning, valuing the "space" to express themselves and clarify their thoughts.

Table 2. Student perceptions of RML by overall domains of learning.

Domains	% Response Proportions					Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
Topics Overall	15.6	9.8	31.5	28.3	14.9	3.2
Pedagogies Overall	9.8	12.0	23.2	27.2	27.9	3.5
Outcomes Overall	13.4	14.5	29.3	25.0	17.8	3.2
RML Overall	13.0	15.2	26.4	26.8	18.5	3.2

3.5. Assessment of Influence

RML was found to be effective generally and within domains of learning Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes. A further analysis of student responses was employed to determine which elements within each theme are most significant and how these elements influence each other and contribute to overall satisfaction. The process entailed the following actions: (1) identification of core elements, which involved selecting four variables within each theme that received the highest mean ratings from students; (2) regression analyses to establish what level of influence existed across the four domains of learning for overall satisfaction for Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes; and (3) regression analysis to evaluate the impact on overall student satisfaction.

Linear regression for the four Core Topics (Ethics, Other World Religions, Catholic Social Teaching, and Jesus) indicated a significant relationship with overall satisfaction with Topics, F (4, 275) = 25.2, $p < 0.0001$, with an R^2 value of 27% for shared variance. For the four Core Pedagogies (Dialogue, Media and Technology, Peer-to-Peer Learning, and Solving Problems), linear regression showed a significant relationship with overall satisfaction with Pedagogies, F (4, 275) = 18.6, $p < 0.0001$, with an R^2 value of 22% for shared variance. For the four Core Outcomes (Listening to Others, Dialoguing with Others, Making Connections, and Contributing to the Community), linear regression indicated a significant relationship with overall satisfaction with Outcomes, F (4, 275) = 44.9, $p < 0.0001$, with an R^2 value of 40% for shared variance. These findings confirmed the significant contributions of the selected Core Topics, Core Pedagogies, and Core Outcomes with their respective overall satisfaction measures.

Multiple regression analysis assessed the ability of the criteria in each of the learning domains of Core Topics, Core Pedagogies, and Core Outcomes to predict overall satisfaction with RML. The model explained 42% of the total variance, F (3, 275) = 64.49, $p < 0.0001$. Core Topics and Core Outcomes made the strongest contributions to overall satisfaction with RML, with the largest beta coefficients of 0.35 and 0.42 respectively, both reaching statistical significance ($p < 0.0001$). The beta value for Core Pedagogies was lower at 0.06, indicating it made a less unique contribution and did not reach significance. Semi-partial correlation coefficients showed that Core Topics and Core Outcomes each uniquely explained 29% of the variance in overall student satisfaction with RML, while Core Pedagogies explained 6%.

The regression analysis of Core Topics, Core Pedagogies, and Core Outcomes explained a considerable variance in student responses to overall satisfaction with RML. Additionally, the individual contributions of Core Topics and Core Outcomes uniquely impacted overall satisfaction with RML. In summary, student responses highlight their satisfaction with RML and its expression in Core Topics, and Core Outcomes with some influence from Core Pedagogies.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The research presented in this paper provides a window into how RE in senior secondary Catholic schools can be responsive to their tradition (particularity) in addressing the multi-religious affiliations or no affiliations of their students (plurality). This challenge for RE is contextualised within Australia and influenced by its unique educational, social, cultural, and ecclesial influences (Barnes 2020). Moreover, this situation of particularity interfacing with plurality finds its further unique expression across states, and Catholic educational authorities within diverse ecclesial settings. What becomes significant with respect to this breadth of relationship and governance emphases in Religious Education are the generic findings of what Topics, Pedagogies, and Outcomes warrant consideration in theoretical terms and with respect to practice. These conclusions are captured in theoretical propositions and practice implications.

4.1. Theoretical Propositions

The following theoretical propositions arising from the research are offered in support of advancing Religious Education in senior secondary schools in light of particularity within the context of religious plurality:

Educational: Based on high-quality educational experiences that encompass relevant topics, effective pedagogies, and meaningful outcomes integral to the mission and culture of the school. Key themes include a relevant curriculum preferencing the Catholic tradition and referencing other religious traditions, ethical applications, dialogical processes, existential questions, experiential learning, and a rich pedagogy.

Social: Focusing on the unique development of learners within the social contexts of the classroom, family, school, and community. Key themes include collaborative processes, student agency, and trusting relationships.

Formative: Shaping and guiding student perspectives through preferencing the Catholic tradition and referencing other world religions on existential questions. Key themes include Gospel values of love and truth, inclusive practices, respectful engagement, and holistic learning.

Communitarian: Connecting students to the mission and religious life of the school and the wider community. Key themes include ecumenical and inter faith perspectives, school mission and religious rituals and practices, community awareness, and participation in service learning.

These theoretical propositions support the effectiveness of recontextualised Religious Education in senior secondary schools. They offer a foundation for the practical implementation of RML at scale and provide frameworks for evaluating and developing similar initiatives.

4.2. Practice Implications

Topics: Students in senior secondary Religious Education prioritise topics that integrate a Catholic Christian faith perspective, explore existential questions, and include knowledge of other world religions to foster inclusive dialogue. They value the application of ethical principles based on the teachings of Jesus and appreciate experiential learning and discussion as key components.

Pedagogy: Students stress the need for developing dialogical skills in all units and ensuring that course content is aligned with experiential learning opportunities. Moreover, students value service learning as a means to demonstrate Christian witness and develop personal and social skills.

Outcomes: Students emphasise the importance of developing interpersonal skills such as active listening, engaging in dialogue, making connections, self-understanding, and contributing to the community. Students recognise the unique and integral role of Religious Education in the mission and identity of the school. Through open, respectful, and meaningful conversations about faith, values, and spirituality, students can deepen their understanding of Catholic teachings, enhance their sense of belonging, and contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture.

In summary, the regression analyses pinpointed a core set of topics, pedagogical practices, and outcomes that significantly predict student satisfaction with Religious Education in the senior secondary school. These core elements include topics such as Ethics, Other World Religions, Catholic Social Teaching, and Jesus; pedagogical practices like Dialogue, Media and Technology, Peer-to-Peer Learning, and Solving Problems; and outcome skills such as Listening to Others, Dialoguing with Others, Making Connections, and Contributing to the Community. Semi-partial correlations confirmed the unique impact of each theme on overall satisfaction. Overall, these findings support educators to enhance and or develop Religious Education in the senior secondary stage of learning.

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Notes

[1] It is important to note that besides justice, peace, and liberation, there is research literature on the social accommodation of controversial systems of social war and against justice, as signaled in Py (2021).

[2] Portions of this article first appeared in popular form in Sultmann et al. (2023).

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religions

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Article

Faith Inside an Immanent Frame

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Abstract: Those who are charged with the responsibility of governing, leading or teaching in Catholic schools at this time are challenged by questions which go to the heart of their school's mission. How is it possible for the mission of the Catholic school to be realised in a culture that is increasingly secularising? What is the secularising context and how is religious belief still possible today? These are questions of profound significance also for the families who seek a Catholic education for their children. Charles Taylor's analysis of our secular age provides a foundation for addressing these questions as do findings from the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) research. Whilst the secularising context is sometimes painted as the enemy of Catholic education, it is presented here as being the context in which Catholic schools must realise their mission and this cultural context, like any cultural context, has elements which support the mission and elements which impede it. The following key concepts from Taylor's analysis are reviewed because of their relevance for Catholic schools: the Expressivist Age, the Cross-Pressured context and the Immanent Frame. The Post-Critical Belief Scale from the ECSI research is also reviewed, as a key finding is that Post-Critical Belief is the only viable option for faith in a secularising context.

Keywords: secularism; Catholic schools; faith formation; enhancing Catholic school identity; Charles Taylor; post-critical belief; immanent frame

1. Introduction

This paper has its origins in a recent keynote I gave to an international Jesuit education seminar. The theme I was given for my address was 'Forming a resilient faith: Teaching for in-depth faith formation in our secular context today'. As I prepared my contribution, I considered questions like: 'What does "our secular context" mean?' 'What does a "resilient faith" look like?' and 'What does it mean to teach for the "in-depth faith formation" of our students today?' Questions like these raise deep cultural and theological issues and the research literature that addresses them is vast and contested. Rather than surveying the literature in its breadth, the following reflections draw chiefly from two sources: the cultural philosophy of Charles Taylor and the Enhancing Catholic school identity research led by Didier Pollefeyt.

Charles Taylor's analysis of secularism is seminal in the field and provides a firm and hope-filled foundation for sharing the Gospel in our day.[1] I focused in particular on concepts such as the 'Immanent Frame' and the cross-pressure that people in a secular age feel as they are squeezed between a self-sufficient, exclusive humanism on the one hand and a sense of finitude on the other. This cross pressure can be experienced as a sense that there must be something more to life than what we can see, know and achieve purely through our own human powers.

As the name suggests, the purpose of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) research is to strengthen the religious identity of Catholic schools. The ECSI research is undertaken in partnership with a growing number of school governing authorities and provides a first-class example of the transdisciplinary approach to theology recently promoted by Pope Francis (Pope Francis 2023).[2] In this paper, I focus on the Post-Critical Belief scale which is one of the three empirical instruments used in the ECSI research, and in so doing I open a conversation between Taylor and ECSI that focuses on how post-critical

faith is still possible in a secularising context where many have relegated religion to a previous age.

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the possibilities in our secular age for students in Catholic schools to grapple with the meaning and destiny of their lives in an educational process that is systematically engaged with the Catholic faith at the same time as it truly embraces the freedom, diversity and active engagement of students that is so characteristic of our secular age. With this purpose in mind, the paper is divided into two parts: Part One draws primarily on Taylor's analysis to present the secular context as one that is open to religious belief, even as it is also open to a range of alternative spiritual and non-religious life-stances. In Part Two, I consider how it is possible to engage students with Catholic faith in a secular context where many believing and non-believing life options are much more visible than they used to be and where support for religious traditions is declining on many measures. We do not proceed far into this discussion before we find ourselves in deep theological and philosophical waters, and so I employ a genre recommended by Max van Manen, which I have called the 'phenomenological anecdote'. The paper concludes by drawing on the Enhancing Catholic School Identity research, particularly from the Victoria Scale and the Post-Critical Belief Scale, to explore the pedagogical implications for Catholic schools of the secularising context.

2. The Secular Age

A key challenge for anyone leading a Catholic school is to understand the ways in which the secularising process both enables and impedes the realisation of their school's mission. Taylor is quite explicit in *A Secular Age* that he is telling the secular story as it has unfolded in Western modernity. One of the lessons for me from the international Jesuit Seminar that gave rise to this paper is that secularisation in one form or another is a worldwide experience, not a phenomenon that only unfolds in the so-called 'West'. It was clear to me that key concepts from Taylor's analysis resonated in different ways with delegates from countries in Africa and Asia, as well as in countries whose national identity was grounded in Latin Christendom. Notwithstanding this resonance at a macro level, the secularising process unfolds idiosyncratically in different cultures, even among nations that would identify as being grounded in Western modernity. For example, church attendance in the United States has typically been much higher than in many other Western countries, although this outlying phenomenon is rapidly changing (Pew Research Centre 2019).

The adversarial nature of some elements of the secularisation literature has been mentioned, and it is therefore important to distinguish between scholarly research and adversarial texts which are ideological, polarising or highly politicised in tone. Lieven Boeve makes this distinction when he discusses the difference between secularism as an ideology and secularisation as a social process (Boeve 2016). The writings of some New Atheists provide examples of an anti-religious polemic where religious dialogue partners can feel they are being bludgeoned for their faith rather than engaged in a genuine debate about the significance and meaning of religion in a secularising culture. On the other side of the ideological coin, there are religiously committed writers who see 'the world' purely in deficit terms and portray secular culture as being the enemy of faith. There is no problem with strongly held views; the ideological problem arises when there is a refusal to engage in good faith with those who hold alternative positions.

The stance taken in this analysis is that secular culture is neither the friend nor the enemy of religion; rather, the secularising culture should be seen as the *context* in which religious faith might be expressed. It is true that atheism is possible today in ways that were inconceivable in previous ages but the possibility or probability of agnostic or atheistic life-stances does not mean that religious belief is impossible in our day. It is true that there are radical secularists who are 'enemies' of Catholic schools in the sense that they are opposed to religious schools receiving any funding from the taxes paid by their families. The stridency of school funding debates should not, however, poison the world-affirming

approach religious schools need to take as they name and nurture transcendence in the lives of those they educate.

Lieven Boeve provides a helpful way into a discussion of the secularising context when he offers the following three categories in his analysis: detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation:

> Every form of identity construction today, including classical-religious or atheistic identities, is determined by the fact that traditions are no longer self-evident (detraditionalization), that identity formation requires the individual's choice and continuing effort (individualization), and that there are a number of traditions, religions and philosophies at one's disposal to give shape to one's identity (pluralization) (Boeve 2016, p. 8).

With these categories in mind, Catholic schools operate in an environment where students will not be drawn into religious commitment simply because their parents or grandparents are committed Catholics. Faith is not 'passed on' from one generation to the next in the way that it once was. Students are well aware that there are many religious and non-religious options available to them and they see themselves as being personally responsible for their beliefs. The individualising sensibility does not respond well to religious authorities who are perceived as offering faith in pre-packaged (and therefore less authentic) forms.

2.1. The Expressivist Age

Boeve's analysis aligns well with Taylor who has also emphasised the active engagement that is necessary if 'seekers' are to embrace a faith commitment in an 'Expressivist Age'. The following sentence from Taylor is often quoted because it captures succinctly a key feature of the Expressivist Age that many Catholic educators will recognise in the lives of their students and even in their fellow members of staff:

> 'Each one of us has his/her own way of realising our humanity, and it is important to find and live out one's own way as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority' (Taylor 2007, p. 475).

In an Expressivist Age, religious or non-religious worldviews are considered to be authentic when they are individually constructed by seekers who potentially draw from many sources, as distinct from faith being built within the scaffolding and language of the religious tradition of one's family, as was the case for many of us in the past. To return to Boeve's terminology of individualisation, pluralisation and detraditionalisation: religious or non-religious beliefs are constructed by individuals who find their own way into faith/non-faith, fully aware that there are many options, rather than being formed from within the locus of a particular religious tradition. Taylor has highlighted the risk of relativism in this individualistic approach, but he has also recognised the importance of authenticity as a 'powerful moral ideal' at work underneath the quest to be true to oneself (Taylor 1991, p. 15). In the Australian context, Hughes has noted that 55% of respondents to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes agreed with the statement 'Life is only meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself', and only 21% disagreed with it (Hughes 2010a, p. 32). Hughes went on to observe that creating meaning is not a straightforward task and that in another study 78% of students affirmed that at least sometimes it was hard to know what to believe about life (Hughes 2010a, p. 33). When interviewed about these statistics, Hughes noted the confusion that young Australians can experience in this context (Hughes 2010b), and this confusion is not restricted to traditional doctrinal issues; it can reach right down deep into identity issues as basic as one's sense of gender. One of the challenges for a Catholic school is to accompany young people by listening to them deeply, by accepting their experiences but without necessarily endorsing their choices. Religious accompaniment in an Expressivist Age is a delicate dance but one whose steps Catholic educators need to

learn if they are to draw effectively from the Tradition in ways that are received as being culturally plausible.

The shift into the Expressivist Age, which Taylor identifies as occurring in the 1960s, obviously raises some fundamental issues for Catholic schools but before considering these in greater depth, it is helpful to clarify which aspect of secularisation Taylor is addressing in his analysis. Taylor helpfully distinguishes between three different understandings of secularity: Secular 1 (the retreat of religion in public life); Secular 2 (the decline in religious belief and practice); and Secular 3 (the change in the conditions of belief). In classical secularisation theory, as societies modernise, religion 'loses its social significance and becomes a purely private matter among a diminishing number of people' (Dixon 2018). Here we see a combination of Secularity 1 and 2, using Taylor's categories.

Taylor focuses on Secular 3 in *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007), and we do likewise in this paper, as we want to look underneath declining religious practice to understand the changing ways in which religious belief is still possible in our day. We adopt this focus with the paper's purpose in mind which is to highlight the possibilities in our secular age for students in Catholic schools to experience a strong witness to Catholic faith in an educational process that genuinely appreciates the pluralising and detraditionalising cultural context in which individuals construct their faith. We have, however, leapt ahead in our reflections as it is fundamental to Taylor's analysis that if we want to understand where we are now in an Expressivist Age, we need to understand where we have come from and if we are to do that, we need to start the story 500 years ago in 'the Enchanted Age'.

2.2. The Enchanted Age

When Catholics reflect on the secularising process, they sometimes turn the clock back six decades to the Second Vatican Council and when 1960 is chosen as the starting place for reflections on secularisation, the narrative easily collapses into a sad Secular 2 Catholic story of deficit and decline. Taylor offers a more hopeful view, however, when he pulls the lens back 500 years to what he calls the Enchanted Age in his analysis. Taylor asks the question: 'Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable?' (Taylor 2007, p. 25) Up until the sixteenth century, events were understood through the prism of blessings and curses, not as a result of factors which could be identified and controlled through scientific investigation and human intervention. Taylor names the period up until 1500 the 'Enchanted Age', and it was an age of superstition, blessings and curses. On a structural level the socio-political world was understood in the Enchanted Age as being ordained by God, rather than as a human construction. There are vestiges of this Enchanted view of governance, power and politics even today when the King of England was crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury and had as his motto: Dieu et mon droit (God and my right). The full compass of Taylor's reflections on secularisation lies beyond the scope of this article, but we focus here on the themes of transcendence, human rights and human agency because they have a particular relevance to the mission and identity challenges that currently confront Catholic schools.

2.3. The Immanent Frame

With the exception of a small minority, most people in Western cultures could not contemplate turning the clock back 500 years to return to an Enchanted Age where events such as pandemics were seen as being a curse from God, rather than being caused by a virus. Not only is it impossible to unknow science, but also none of us want to return to the mediaeval world where the human person is buffeted by curses and blessings beyond their control and where human rights as we now understand them were unimaginable. Taylor uses the expression 'Immanent Frame' to describe the Western worldview where superstition has been left behind, where the world is regarded through a scientific lens and where human rights and human agency have become foundational and permanently embedded. Hughes has questioned whether we are living in a 'post-Axial age' given the

advances in human knowledge which have led many people to question whether there is 'anything beyond the reality that science can investigate' (Hughes 2019, p. 12).

Taylor presents the secular age as a significant human achievement that unfolded over centuries of socio-cultural processes which include the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and the recognition of human rights reflected in developments such as the abolition of slavery and the right of men (and eventually women) to vote. I find it helpful in my work with Catholic educators to begin a consideration of secularism by emphasing the positive dimensions of the culture in which their students are being educated. Of course there are many aspects of the secular context that radically challenge the mission of Catholic schools, but I find it helpful to begin with the positive because those who lead and govern Catholic schools can easily become overwhelmed by the decline in religious practice and the loss of religious identity coherence that was experienced in a previous age prior to the rise of the individualising, detraditionalising and pluralising cultural currents that have been considered above. In the secularisation workshops I conduct with Catholic educators, we begin by naming positive human achievements from the past five centuries. Together we generate lists of achievements such as the following: the right to vote, married women being able to continue in paid employment, the inclusion of aboriginals in the Australian census, the legal recognition of aboriginal custodianship over land and a dawning awareness of the beauty and spiritual depth of first nations peoples. The list lengthens considerably when the many benefits that flow from science and technology are included. Once we have painted this picture on the large canvas of human achievements, we step back to recognise the many benefits inherent in our secular age and no one wants to wind the clock back to the Enchanted Age. This recognition provides a basis for appreciating secularisation as the context for the expression of religious faith, rather than being its enemy.

The following two snapshots from the United States provide two brief examples of the increasing human agency that has grown over the past five centuries in the West:

> We the people . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution (Preamble to the US Constitution 1787).

In this example, it is 'we the people' who ordain and establish the Constitution, and here we see a shift in sovereignty from God to 'the people'—a shift which would have been unimaginable in the Enchanted Age. The example below reflects further Enlightenment themes such as human rights, liberty and happiness.

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (American Declaration of Independence 1776).

In this Declaration, 'the Creator' is still present as the source and endower of the rights that men (sic) enjoy. As the centuries unfold, however, it becomes increasingly possible for societies to embrace what Taylor calls 'Exclusive Humanism' which he defines in the following terms:

> The coming of modern secularity . . . has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true (Taylor 2007, p. 18).

Whilst Taylor notes that agnostic or atheistic stances are possible now in ways that were inconceivable previously, Taylor also points out that an experience of transcendence is still possible from within an immanent frame.

2.4. Cross Pressure and the Nova Effect

Taylor notes that there are open and closed takes on the Immanent Frame when it comes to transcendence. Exclusive humanism is not the only option within the Immanent

Frame as it is eminently possible to live the life of faith and at the same time accept the findings and benefits of scientific methods. The following quote from Taylor sets the scene well for our consideration of the possibilities for a viable faith formation in our secular age:

> 'We can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction, or an obstacle to our greatest good. Or we can read it as answering our deepest craving, need, fulfillment of the good' (Taylor 2007, p. 548).

Taylor counters simplistic secular narratives such as, on the religious side, those who regard the secularising process as an inexorable descent into godlessness or, conversely, those secular humanists who see secularisation as a necessary liberation of the human spirit from the shackles of religion and superstition. The real story in Taylor's view is much more interesting and nuanced. It is a story of human flourishing with many noble achievements that we wish to keep, and it is a story that still leaves open the possibility of religious belief, even though many non-believing positions have now also become possible. Whilst Taylor recognises the worthy human achievements associated with the secularising process, he also acknowledges the limitations. He highlights, for example, the sense that many have that there must be a transcending reality beyond, underneath and within a merely scientistic–materialist worldview. There is a tension between the experience of human flourishing on many fronts and a sense that there must be 'something more'. Taylor calls this tension a 'cross pressure', and this pressure fractures and multiplies worldviews into a 'supernova' of options.

> The religious life of Western societies is much more fragmented than ever before, and also much more unstable, as people change their positions during a lifetime, or between generations, to a greater degree than ever before. The salient feature of Western societies is not so much a decline of religious faith and practice, though there has been lots of that, more in some societies than in others, but rather a mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as of the outlooks both of belief and unbelief. The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieux of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent. The cross pressures are experienced more acutely by some people and in some milieux than others, but over the whole culture, we can see them reflected in a number of middle positions, which have drawn from both sides (Taylor 2007, pp. 594–95).

Of course, the human story is not only characterised by flourishing and liberation; it is also characterised by finitude, depravity and oppression. With this in mind, participants are invited in the secular workshops I lead to list events that undermine human flourishing. Typical items on the list of human failures include wars between nations, the holocaust, decreasing mental health, the sexual abuse of children, the impact of colonisation on first nations peoples, the increasing possibility of nuclear war and the very future of a habitable planet, to mention just a few examples. Once this list has been created, we are well on the way to a collective recognition of the cross-pressured and fractured secularising context that Taylor names in his analysis. In many ways the fractures and fragilization Taylor describes provide the fault lines and frontiers on which evangelisation might unfold in our secular age. We recognise that it is not a matter of working against the secularising context; it is a matter of working within it. Statistics such as the 50% increase in defined mental health disorders among 16- to 24-year-olds in Australia (McIlroy 2024) or the record-breaking floods or mega fires wreaking havoc internationally provide just a few examples where it is possible to challenge the narrative of exclusive humanism. Further opportunities for opening out into transcendence arise on the positive side of the ledger as people share their hopes for a life-partner, vocational aspirations and other elements associated with the joy, meaning and destiny of their lives.

With the above very brief review of the secularising cultural context, we are almost ready to consider the implications of secularisation for the mission of the Catholic school.

Before doing so, however, it is helpful to highlight some points which have a particular relevance to Catholic education. Human flourishing and self-determination are taken as both norms and imperatives in an Expressivist Age, and any attempt to impose a way of seeing the world on the basis of religious authority is unlikely to be received positively. The cross-pressured dimension of human experience provides an opportunity for recognising and appreciating transcendence. Whilst it is possible now in a secular age to embrace an exclusive humanism where there is no room for transcendence, atheism is by no means the only possibility or even the choice of the majority. The nova effect has given rise to a pluralising array of life-stances, albeit within the context of the characteristics that have been noted regarding the Immanent Frame. The mission of the Catholic school is realised most effectively when leaders and teachers are able to till the secular soil in ways that help seeds of faith to grow, rather than retreating from the secularising culture to try to grow faith in some other soil.

In my work with educators, I challenge narratives which present secularisation as a cultural force that overwhelms any possibility of realising a Catholic school's religious identity or mission. For example, my experience in working with staff in Catholic schools is that they respond well to the Victoria Scale in the Enhancing Catholic School Identity research (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020). The key message from this Scale is that teachers in a Catholic school should not feel that they have to choose to be either Catholic in their approach or to be inclusive; they should be both Catholic AND inclusive. Instead of diversity being seen as a threat to Catholic identity, it can become an enriching enlivenment of the mission in schools when the requisite expertise, witness and pedagogical skills have been mandated and developed. In a pluralising context, it is expected that differences and disagreements will arise in any discussion that involves meaning, and this obviously includes any discussion that has a religious dimension. When properly handled, these differences provide the energy and impetus for students to be challenged and *educated* in the learning process. In an Expressivist Age, or in an age characterised by individualisation, pedagogies need to be employed that involve students actively in their learning. In a Catholic school this active engagement unfolds in the context of a systematic engagement with Catholic perspectives and beliefs. This requires teachers who can witness to their faith and who know the Catholic tradition well enough to accompany students into issues and questions that matter to the students. The challenge to embrace diversity and provide a Catholic engagement, both at the same time, is only met by teachers who can enact pedagogies where students feel that they are engaged in a genuine dialogue that welcomes their perspectives, even as the dialogue is explicitly, systematically, openly and unapologetically illuminated by the light of Catholic faith. A more detailed account of this pedagogy is available in the WSM (Witness, Specialist, Moderator) approach to Religious Education developed in Flanders, Belgium (Pollefeyt 2008).

3. Faith on the Frontier

In a memorable phrase that is often cited, Pope Francis observed that 'we are not living in an epoch of change but in a change of epoch' (Pope Francis 2019). In this new epoch, Francis noted that 'Christendom no longer exists! Today we are no longer the only ones who create culture, nor are we in the forefront or those most listened to' (Pope Francis 2019). Francis quoted from one of his predecessors (Pope John Paul II 1990) who urged the Church to 'push forward to new frontiers', and we head now to one of those frontiers.

3.1. Catholic Faith Inside an Immanent Frame

We have seen in our review of the secularising process that the world is experienced from within an Immanent Frame—a frame of reference in which there is no place for demons, spirits or superstition, and where there is a rejection of religious beliefs that are imposed forcefully or even subtly on the basis of divine authority. We live instead in a world where faith can only be received when it is proposed, not imposed—to take up a

phrase that Pope Benedict made popular (Pope Benedict 2008). How can Catholic faith be proposed in ways that enable it to be received within an Immanent Frame?

Paul Ricoeur was a French philosopher whose reflections on post-critical belief provide a sound foundation for designing formation programs within an immanent frame. Ricoeur described the movement from naïve belief, through critique, into a post-critical appropriation, or to use his terminology into a second naïveté. Ricoeur argued that it is impossible to 'live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them', or we might say in these reflections that it is impossible to believe as a person in the Enchanted Age might have believed. Whilst we cannot go back to a 'primitive naïveté' we can 'aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism' (Ricoeur 1967, p. 351). Ricoeur's philosophy has provided a basis for the development of the 'Post-Critical Belief Scale'—the empirical instrument we are considering from the Enhancing Catholic School Identity research.

The Post-Critical Belief (PCB) Scale is formed on two axes: a horizontal axis that measures the extent to which one is open or closed to transcendence and a vertical axis that measures the degree to which one is open or closed to interpreting the contents of religious belief. The combination of these two dimensions of transcendence and interpretation gives rise to a typology comprising four different believing styles which are named as follows in the ECSI research: Literal Belief, External Critique, Relativism and Post-Critical Belief. As is the case with any typology, people typically exhibit a mixture of typological traits, rather than being located purely in one type or another. The following description presents extreme examples of the four types, however, for the sake of clarity. We begin by considering the pair of types (Literal Belief and External Critique) that are closed to interpretation but differ markedly in their attitude towards transcendence.

Although 'Literal Belief' and 'External Critique' sit at opposite extremes of the PCB scale when it comes to transcendence, they share a certainty that their way of seeing the world is the only valid one. Context and interpretation play no role in Literal Belief and External Critique and in extremis genuine dialogue is impossible. Those who take the stance of External Critique reject religious belief on the basis of a fixed understanding of what it entails and on the basis of a rejection of the experience of transcendence. Those who take the stance of Literal Belief embrace religion on the basis, again, of a fixed understanding of what it entails and there is no room for dialogue because the contents of faith are perceived to have been communicated directly, rather than being interpreted through some mediation—for example through scripture or doctrine that is formulated in a particular context and in a particular genre.

The second pair of stances towards religion in the PCB model (Relativism and Post-Critical Belief) share an appreciation for the constructed and contextual dimension of all human knowing but they differ in their experience of transcendence. The Relativist has no sense of transcendence being revealed in human experience and history, and so religious beliefs for the Relativist are merely human constructions that have no real anchor or referent beyond the self: 'each individual's way of interpreting meaning is one equal option among a vast many, since all religions are equally untrue' (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020, p. 82). The ultimate authority for Relativists is the self as there is no recognition of a living, transcendent being who is revealed and apprehended in, through and beyond the religious mediations. Unlike those in External Critique, Relativists are able to engage in a dialogue with religious people, even though they do not accept the truth claims that are inherent in religious belief. Dialogue with relativists is possible because they believe each person has their own way of seeing the world, and there is no authority, standard or truth beyond the self by which the relative merits of interpretations might be measured.

The fourth stance in the PCB typology is Post-Critical Belief—a stance which is characterised by a strong experience of transcendence combined with an appreciation that the contents of faith always need to be interpreted because they are mediated in some way—never grasped directly and literally. The ECSI researchers argue persuasively in my view that post-critical belief is the only viable faith option in our age because to believe is

only possible and meaningful after interpretation (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014, p. 197). It is not easy to hold the Post-Critical Belief space open, as on the one hand, Literal Believers can consider Post-Critical Belief to be a form of relativism, whereas Relativists and those in External Critique can see Post-Critical Belief as having fundamentalist or superstitious overtones. Post-Critical Belief from a Catholic perspective reflects a sacramental realism where the contents of faith are always experienced via a mediation but a mediation that nonetheless carries real presence, rather than being an empty sign that carries nothing within itself beyond a human construction.

At this point in our reflections, we find ourselves facing deep theological and philosophical questions. What is the status of human knowing? Is there an objective reality that is able to be known, at least in some way, through and beyond a human construction? How can transcendence be apprehended within the context of finite human experience? What sense can be made of the claims of Christians that at the heart of their faith is not a doctrine but a human person who is also the second person of a Trinitarian God who is revealed as love at the heart of the universe? How can Catholics experience this second person of the Trinity as being truly and really present to them in Catholic sacraments?

Rather than address these questions theoretically I find it helpful to address them through the genre of the anecdote given in Max van Manen's presentation of phenomenology for qualitative researchers (van Manen 2014). The details of van Manen's consideration of the ways in which phenomenology might enrich qualitative research lie beyond the scope of these reflections but, in short, Van Manen offers the anecdote as one among many phenomenological tools for qualitative researchers. I have included two anecdotes in these reflections because I agree with van Manen's observation that anecdotes convey 'something noteworthy or important about life, about the promises and practices, frustrations and failures, events and accidents, disappointments and successes of our everyday living' (van Manen 2014, p. 250). Anecdotes come in a variety of forms; they can be superficial, or they can be deepened through phenomenological reflection to prompt important insights into the essential features of life experiences that matter. The anecdotes are offered in these reflections as a bridge between the cultural analysis in Part One of the paper and the pedagogical considerations that are opened up in Part Two. We move now into a consideration of the secularising context in which Catholic schools seek to realise their mission.

The following anecdote is offered as a window on a moment of post-critical belief as it unfolded recently in my own experience.

3.2. In Sacred Liturgy

> In recent years, I have rediscovered the joy of attending weekday Masses. The quiet prayerfulness of the little group that gathers each weekday to celebrate the Eucharist transports me in ways that are impossible to convey or replicate. The mystery and presence of Christ who is uniquely present in this smaller and more intimate ritual has become very rich and real for me. It had been a busy week, and I had a real sense of relief as I walked towards the parish Church that finally I was going to be able to enter the transporting peace of my contemplative time.
>
> As I enter the Church, though, I am stunned to see four or five hundred people inside, and the place is abuzz with conversation that seems most unliturgical to me. What is going on? Is this a funeral? Why would they have a funeral clashing against the morning mass? No, there must be some other explanation. There it was on the screen above the sanctuary: "Grandparents and Special Friends Day". With a sense of disappointment and frustration, I conclude that there is no quiet to be had here today with the Year 3s bustling up and down the aisles searching for their grandparents. The place was a hive of activity. Shall I turn around and go home? Am I going to be the archetypal grumpy old man who complains when 'the school' ruins the parish liturgy? No, I'll stay.
>
> As the Mass is about to begin, the principal makes her way to the grandparents in the pew behind me and asks them would they carry the bread and wine down

> the aisle in the gift procession. She tells them that their granddaughter had been specially selected for this ministry. There is a pause, and grandfather says 'no' just as grandmother is saying 'yes'. How awkward. The principal asks 'no?' to grandfather who then reverses his position and says 'yes'. We all breathe a sigh of relief. This is not the liturgy I was expecting, but I have to admit that I let go of some of my disappointment when the Gathering Hymn begins, and the children open up a uniquely reverent space though their innocent singing. As the ritual unfolds, I make my peace with the liturgy I wasn't expecting, but I do find myself wondering as Communion approaches whether with so many people, we will be able to keep the sacred space open while communicants are being fed from the altar.
>
> We are not long into the Communion procession when the grandmother in front of me turns to the little person in my pew to remark upon the beauty of his eyes, and a conversation with his proud parents opens. I can't help noticing the two cups of coffee that grandmother has brought with her into the Church, and these must have been consumed before the liturgy began. I also can't help being edified as the two families converse and affirm each other. What matters more I ask myself: the breach of the post-Communion silence or the communion of a different order that these two families are opening up? In which experience is Christ more present? I ponder these questions on my journey home, and I have continued to do so.

I offer this little anecdote because talk of transcendence, finitude, epistemology and ontology doesn't find an easy home in the busy lives and hot action of most school leaders and teachers that I know. They will, however, recognise the issues that the anecdote raises. They will recognise, too, the window into transcendence that is opened up in the following reflection from a Year 11 student who had recently returned from an indigenous immersion experience in Lake Mungo with about 20 of her classmates.

3.3. On Sacred Country

> It was the second day; I was sitting, and we had just gone for a walk to the dunes and a big focus was writing in our journal and reflecting and being present to what we were experiencing at that time. And I remember we had just been taken into the desert by the aboriginal elder, and there were 15 of us walking around these untouched sand dunes, and the elder said 'this artefact is 60,000 years old: Do you want to hold it?' And I remember journaling afterwards and looking at the sand dunes and looking at the girls and realising how small we are. I think, I always had that sense that we are quite miniscule in the grand scheme of things, but it really just dawned on me how long everything has existed and just the whole putting stuff into perspective, and from there I was just so grateful for everything, and I had a moment where I was like wow, I matter, but I don't matter. A real paradox.
>
> At the same time, it was kind of a moment of click, but I also got more confused, I was like if I'm so small and minuscule and what I do doesn't matter at all, and I am just a tiny little blip in the universe's existence, but then I think if I am lucky enough to be this little blip, then shouldn't every moment be so important because it's the only moment you get on a big scale so I was just mind blown for a pretty long time. A good mind blown, not a bad mind blown.

These are two very different anecdotes: one from a man reflecting on his experience of liturgy after a lifetime of catechesis in Catholic faith and another from a young woman standing on the threshold of adulthood and opening herself up to the vastness of the universe that she is moving into. One way to understand the four types of the Post-Critical Belief Scale is to imagine how their exponents might respond to these two anecdotes. It should be remembered that the PCB Scale is not concerned with the contents of religious

belief but with the significance given to interpretation, transcendence, experience and context by the four believing/non-believing types. The reflections which follow consider the anecdotes indicatively with these elements in mind.

A person of faith who is not inclined towards interpretation or sensitive to context might be quite critical of the grandparents who brought a cup of coffee into the Church and their breach of protocol during Communion. Such a person might also feel that the grandfather who initially refused to participate in the gift procession was acting responsibly if he did not believe that the gifts he was carrying were going to be transformed at the consecration. Such a person might also question why students in a Catholic school were being exposed to aboriginal ways of understanding the universe when they should have been studying this from a Catholic perspective. Those in External Critique might feel, however, that everyone was wasting their time in the grandparents' liturgy as we all would have been better off simply gathering for coffee and building community on a human level. The person in External Critique might also feel that the aboriginal dreaming stories were well and good as long as the students appreciated that the real truth lay elsewhere—in the sciences of astronomy and geology. The Relativist on the other hand would be open to all of the experiences conveyed in the anecdotes as long as no truth claims were made in them.

Post-Critical Believers have a keen sense of transcendence in their experience, and they are also attuned to the necessity of interpretation and the importance of context. Liturgy for the Post-Critical Believer is not just a human construction; it has a reality across time and place that transcends the experiences and opinions of individuals. For the Post-Critical Believer, the sacred time and space of the liturgy is real, not a fluid human fabrication that can be reshaped at will. In a Catholic context the Mass is an experience where Christ is truly and really present in the bread and wine, in the proclamation of the sacred text, in the gathered community and in the person of the priest. Because there is a sensitivity to context, the Post-Critical Believer is also aware, however, that many of the people in a 'Grandparents and Special Friends' liturgy may not be familiar with the ritual and its rubrics and that in equivalent situations in the gospel, Jesus prioritised people over rules. The tension between the sacredness of the liturgy and the lack of appreciation of that sacredness by some of the assembly would not, however, be easily resolved by the Post-Critical Believer, as might be the case with the Relativist who takes the live-and-let-live approach that is so easy to adopt when there is no truth claim at stake in the different perspectives. The Post-Critical Believer might also want to engage critically with the daily mass goer to ask him about his openness to the presence of Christ in the gathered assembly and in the spirituality of communion that was such a 'distraction' for him at points during the liturgy. Similarly, the Post-Critical Believer might seek to savour the young woman's experience of awe and wonder in the night sky while she was on Country. There could be an affirmation of her cogent grasp of transcendence and its implications for her life and this affirmation could open a deep dialogue about how she makes sense of the aboriginal dreaming, given her context as a person who has a very different cultural and religious background. In each of these cases, the Post-Critical believer engages in critique, interpretation and context but always with a view towards a post-critical appropriation of transcendence, meaning and commitment in truth.

Transcendence is mediated through liturgy, sacred text and the gathered assembly in the liturgical anecdote, whereas in the Lake Mungo anecdote, transcendence is experienced through creation and an elder who stands in the most ancient of aboriginal traditions. Transcendence, by definition, is not confined to one category of human experience but is apprehended across the full spectrum of life. The following reflection on this point is taken from the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola as expressed in the first characteristic of Jesuit education:

> God is present in our lives, "labouring for us" in all things; He can be discovered through faith in all natural and human events, in history as a whole, and most especially in the lived experience of each individual person (ICAJE 1986).

Catholic education offers the possibility to consider the educational process through the prism of God labouring for us in all things. The whole curriculum in the Catholic school is rich with opportunities for transcendent spaces to be opened—for example, in the school's policies, pastoral care, budgets, outreach programs, pedagogy and in each and every classroom. In a secularising cultural context, however, transcendence is experienced from within an Immanent Frame, and so those who lead and teach in a Catholic school need to be intentional and explicit in their approach to transcendence if the mission and Catholic identity of the school is to be expressed authentically. As well as being explicit in their approach, Catholic educators also need to be comprehensive in the breadth of human experience that is addressed in the curriculum. For example, one of the more recent findings of the ECSI research is that students reject faith as an authentic option if they are fed a saccharine and two-dimensional religious diet. which implies that God is only found in certainty and positive human experiences, rather than also in the equally revelatory experiences of doubt, anxiety, vulnerability and complexity (Pollefeyt 2021).

4. Conclusions

The secularising culture has been presented in these reflections as being the context for Catholic education, not its enemy or its friend. Whilst it is possible in our age for a self-sufficient, exclusive humanism to be embraced that is circumscribed by science and a totalising sense of human agency that leaves no room for transcendence, this is only one of many possible options in a secularising cultural context. Once the ties to particular religious traditions are broken, people are free to put life together in their own ways and this gives rise to so many options that Taylor has referred to them as a 'supernova' of believing and non-believing life-stances. Notwithstanding this diversity, some important characteristics of our age are described clearly and well in Taylor's presentation of the Immanent Frame. We are no longer buffeted by spirits and curses as people in an Enchanted Age were. In an Expressivist Age, we see ourselves as having agency and rights and we believe we are responsible for finding our own way in life, as distinct from being formed in the context of a particular religious tradition.

These characteristics of the secularising cultural context present obvious challenges for Catholic educators but they need not be insurmountable if the opportunities for opening the Immanent Frame out into transcendence are recognised. The cross-pressure that is created when human flourishing meets human finitude is a creative pressure that can be harnessed in the service of the mission and identity of Catholic schools. Whilst it can be exciting to make your way out onto the frontiers of belief and meaning, it can also be frightening and exhausting, particularly for young people who are still deeply in the throes of identity formation. Catholic educators have the opportunity to draw deeply from the Catholic well as they accompany their students in a quest for meaning and commitment that is worthy of them. The ECSI research has more to offer when it comes to considering how this accompaniment might mediate between faith and culture or how the tension between identity and inclusion might be reconciled, but these are topics that are already addressed elsewhere and will continue to be explored by those of us who are committed to the seminar theme that gave rise to this paper: 'Forming a resilient faith: Teaching for in-depth faith formation in our secular context today'.

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Notes

[1] Charles Taylor's analysis of secularism is given in A Secular Age which is unfortunately a massive work that most readers won't have the time to read. Key elements of his analysis are however accessible in other works listed in the Bibliography and a good starting reference is A Catholic modernity 25 years on (Taylor 2021).

[2] Didier Pollefeyt is a professor at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL) and an overview of the ECSI research is given in articles authored by Pollefeyt and two of his KUL team members: Jan Bouwens (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2010) and Michael Richards (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020). A comprehensive account of the research and its findings is given in Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2014). The ECSI research is not without its critics who, in my view, have approached the research from an ideological perspective that demonstrates a very distorted and superficial understanding of the way it has actually been implemented in schools. The critiques have their roots in disputed areas of disciplines as diverse as philosophy, theology, ecclesiology and missiology. A review of the debate lies well beyond the scope of this paper but the following references are recommended for those who are interested to review ECSI responses to the critiques: Didier Pollefeyt's response to criticisms advanced in a review of Religious Education in the Melbourne Archdiocese (Pollefeyt 2023) and Robyn Horner's response to criticisms of ECSI published in the Irish Theological Quarterly (Horner 2023).

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Article

Religious Education (RE) as a *Context*: The Subcultures That Shape Teacher's Work When Teaching This Subject in Australian Catholic Secondary Schools

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Abstract: Religious Education (RE) can be conceived of as a specific context within which secondary RE teachers from diverse backgrounds teach. This context gives rise to distinctive subject subcultures, characterised by a unique set of beliefs, norms, and practices that are shared by teachers who teach RE. Using micronarratives as a way to initiate further discussion and to distil some key points which can be elaborated upon, we illustrate some salient aspects of RE's subcultures. These include a subculture of ambiguity, boundary crossings and objects, and a confusion of purpose and terms. Knowledge of these may better assist schools—and Catholic Schools' Departments—to orient and support these teachers in their classroom practice.

Keywords: religious education (RE); school subjects as context; subject subcultures; RE teachers; Australian Catholic secondary schools

1. Introduction

School subjects can be conceived of as specific contexts within which secondary teachers teach, and these contexts are socially constructed. In her work, Lave (1988) makes a useful distinction between arenas and settings in her description of context. Arenas are defined as the larger institutions, which, though socially constructed, possess a given set of features that both enable and constrain certain activities. A setting, on the other hand, is the individually constructed and represented version of the arena. The construct of setting enables an understanding as to why individuals can experience the same arena so differently. Teachers of a specific school subject, then, share a common arena for practice, though they may differ in the ways in which they interpret that subject.

In this paper, we argue that Religious Education (RE) can be conceived of as a specific context within which secondary RE teachers teach. We further contend that this context in which RE teachers teach gives rise to a number of distinctive subject subcultures, characterised by a unique set of beliefs, norms, and practices. Using micronarratives, we illustrate some salient aspects of RE's subcultures and make some provisional recommendations for practice. As far as we can discern, RE in Catholic secondary schools has not previously been explored as a context in which RE teachers teach, and the notion of subculture has not been applied to RE in Australian Catholic secondary schools.

1.1. Compelling Reasons for Exploring RE as a Context

The context of RE in Australian Catholic secondary schools warrants exploration due to its unique challenges and significance. RE exists at the intersection of pedagogy and faith formation, requiring teachers to navigate diverse student backgrounds, institutional expectations, and a secularised societal context. Rymarz and Cleary (2018) highlight the *Hymnus 53*. AHMA 1, 92. *Hymnus 52. Salutationes BMV.* AHMA 15, 71–72.critical role of RE in addressing shifts in societal religious identity and fostering critical religious literacy (see

also Goldburg 2008). However, little is known about how RE's subcultures shape teacher practices, particularly in Australian Catholic schools. This research addresses that gap by examining RE's context as a socially constructed arena where teachers' diverse beliefs, norms, and practices intersect.

1.2. Distinguishing Between Arena, Setting, and Context

Following Lave (1988), this study employs "arena", "setting", and "context" to conceptualise the RE teaching environment. The "arena" refers to the overarching framework of Catholic education in Australia, characterised by shared institutional goals and practices. The "setting" reflects the localised interpretations of these goals by individual schools, shaped by factors such as leadership and community demographics. The "context" encapsulates the interplay of these elements, focussing on how RE subcultures influence teacher identity and practice. For instance, RE's context in a metropolitan school may differ significantly from that in a rural school, given disparities in resources and staff expertise.

1.3. Subject Subcultures

From the perspective of teacher socialisation, school subjects are specific contexts within which secondary school teachers teach. These specific contexts can also be referred to as "arenas for practice" (Grossman and Stodolsky 1995), although, as noted above, individuals can experience the same arena in differently ways. Therefore, the features comprising various school subjects create particular implications for the nature of teaching within those subjects. School subjects possess different features, histories, and statuses that affect teachers' work (Goodson 1985) and result in the normative views of particular subjects that are shared by those teachers who teach them. The shared norms and beliefs about the subject matter that bind teachers together in terms of practice, curricular autonomy, and coordination may be characterised as subcultures (Ball and Lacey 1984; Stodolsky 1993; Grossman and Stodolsky 1995).

While the notion of subject subcultures emanates originally from the work of Ball and Lacey (1984) and has been expounded upon by Grossman and Stodolsky (1995), its application has been utilised more recently in relation to various subject that comprise the secondary school curriculum. For instance, Baggott La Velle et al. (2004) drew on science teacher interview data collected as a part of a wider project in an attempt to define and characterise the subculture of secondary school science. They found, for instance, that participants' discussion of "science as paradigm" included descriptions of biographical experiences that have shaped their views. The project also took into account those characteristics of science that participants considered important; how this was linked with school science, including perceived differences between professional/academic science and secondary school science; their own feelings towards science, including viewing themselves as scientists; and consideration of the contextualisation of their science—that is, its relevance to everyday life.

Likewise, Erixon (2010) investigated how school subject paradigms (that is, the established content of teaching and the way in which teaching is traditionally organised—the subject subcultures) are influenced when digital media are utilised in education contexts. Erixon found that the classification of school subjects and the framing of teaching is challenged when media and ICT are introduced into teaching. Content, working methods, and the role of the teacher in teaching particular subjects, such as science, English, and so on, are contested and altered when media and ICT are introduced into those subjects, impacting on the subject subcultures, usually for the better, and this can result in a change in attitudes to teaching in various subject areas.

Similarly, McGarr and Lynch (2017) used the notion of subject subcultures to examine the divergence in the treatment of STEM subjects within the Irish second-level context through the lenses of subject hierarchies. They found the subjects of science and mathematics have an advantage due to their power and privilege within the educational system over the subjects of technology and engineering. They maintain that "the subjects of Science

and Maths are populating the traditional space of Technology while preventing a similar encroachment from the historically vocationally based technology subjects into their space" (p. 60).

There is, however, a gap in the literature in terms of subject subcultures being applied to RE, and more particularly to RE in Australian Catholic secondary schools. Understanding RE's subcultures would better enable teachers of this subject to be socialised into this arena of practice, especially those who find themselves teaching this as an out-of-field subject. Exploring how RE departments in schools socialise teachers into their arena may illuminate how beliefs about RE within a school are maintained over time. Understanding teachers' perceptions of the features, histories, and status of RE is important as teachers bring different frames of reference to their teaching. A knowledge of these may better assist schools—and Catholic Schools' Offices—to orient and support these teachers in their classroom practice.

1.4. Teaching RE in Australia—History and Status

RE in Australian Catholic primary and secondary schools is a subject with a formal curriculum for the classroom learning and teaching of religion (National Catholic Education Commission [NCEC] 2018). From an educational perspective, it is a scholastic discipline with the same educational demands and rigor as those of other subjects. Although there are a number of state-based courses in RE for senior secondary school students, meaning that these courses can be studied in both state and faith-based schools, it has largely been the Catholic system of schooling in Australia that has developed RE as a systematic subject in its curriculum (Goldburg 2008; Rossiter 2007).

RE teachers face a complex role that involves contemporary pedagogies, institutional accountabilities, and the evangelising mission of Catholic schools (Elliott et al. 2019). This complexity demands a sophisticated approach to RE instruction, promoting a dialogical and dialectical method where students' and teachers' perspectives are openly exchanged, debated, and explored with mutual respect and honesty (Barnes 2005).

Rymarz and Cleary (2018) highlight that a crucial task for RE teachers is to base their teaching on a deep understanding of their students to effectively deliver content-driven education. They emphasise that both content mastery and effective pedagogy are essential and interdependent. The quality of classroom teaching is pivotal in meeting student needs, yet it has often been neglected in recent Catholic school history. Teaching in RE is far from straightforward; it demands substantial effort to engage students and make abstract concepts accessible and meaningful.

The requirements for gaining and maintaining accreditation to teach RE in Catholic schools in Australia are complex and can vary from state to state. For instance, in the state of Victoria, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) distinguishes between two categories of accreditation: (1) accreditation to teach in a Catholic school generally and (2) accreditation to teach RE or lead in a Catholic school. The latter requires formal and assessed study in RE, Theology, and Catholic Leadership, with the courses approved for such undertakings approved by the agreement of the diocesan heads of RE. Figure 1 outlines these requirements, and as can be seen, gaining and maintaining such accreditation is a rigorous process culminating in both the acquisition of formal qualifications and maintenance via prescribed hours on ongoing professional learning and formation.

However, from an ecclesial perspective, RE teachers are expected not only to have formal qualifications and accreditation to teach this subject but are also expected to be witnesses of Christian life. The Congregation for Catholic Education (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE] 1988) maintains that "the effectiveness of religious instruction is closely tied to the personal witness given by the teacher; this witness is what brings the content of the lessons to life" (n. 96). Such a notion is further supported by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation (Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation [PCPNE] 2020) in its insistence that "it is required that teachers be

believers committed to personal growth in the faith [and] incorporated into a Christian community" (n. 318). Accordingly, the National Catholic Education Commission [NCEC] (2018) maintains that RE is rich and authentic when "the teacher witnesses to a living faith that invites students to discipleship and mission" (p. 15).

Requirements for gaining and maintaining accreditation

Level	Gaining	Maintaining
	Accreditation is **gained** by undertaking:	Accreditation is **maintained** by undertaking:
1. Accreditation to Teach in a Catholic School	25 hours of professional learning balanced across the three categories, within five years of being employed	25 hours of professional learning or formation balanced across the three categories, in each five-year period following the initial gaining of Level 1 accreditation
2. Accreditation to Teach Religious Education or Lead in a Catholic School	Formal, assessed study in Religious Education/Theology/Catholic Leadership within five years of being employed (courses are approved by agreement of the diocesan heads of Religious Education). A qualification in Catholic Leadership (e.g., a master's degree) must include four units of Religious Education or Theology (or equivalent)	50 hours of professional learning or formation balanced across the three categories, in each five-year period following the initial gaining of Level 2 accreditation

Accreditation categories

The following categories apply to gaining and maintaining Accreditation to Teach in a Catholic School, and maintaining Accreditation to Teach Religious Education or Lead in a Catholic School:

1. the aims and objectives of the Catholic school
2. Catholic curriculum, Religious Education and faith development
3. Catholic identity, culture, tradition and theology (including prayer, liturgy, Scripture and Catholic social teaching).

Figure 1. Requirements for gaining and maintaining accreditation in Victoria.

It follows, from this, that RE teachers must be thoroughly equipped for their roles, as "an unprepared teacher can do a great deal of harm" (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE] 1988, n. 97). This underscores the necessity of ensuring that Catholic schools have properly trained religion teachers. To address this, there is a need to "look to the future and promote the establishment of formation centres for these teachers; ecclesiastical universities and faculties should do what they can to develop appropriate programs so that the teachers of tomorrow will be able to carry out their task with the competence and efficacy that is expected of them" (n. 97).

It is clear, then, that RE teachers in Catholic schools have an indispensable role. As "the key and vital component" in achieving educational goals of the school, "teachers of religion, therefore, must be men and women endowed with many gifts, both natural and supernatural, who are also capable of giving witness to these gifts; they must have a thorough cultural, professional, and pedagogical training, and they must be capable of genuine dialogue" (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE] 1988, n. 96).

2. Methodology—Micronarratives

This paper draws on the notion of "micronarratives", using these in an initial attempt to articulate the subculture of RE, that is, the beliefs, norms and practices that shape teachers' work and professional identity when teaching this particular subject in Australian Catholic secondary schools.

Higgins (2007) maintains that micronarratives are a powerful way to initiate further discussion of complex topics by presenting vignettes that distil some key points which can then be elaborated upon. Similarly, Devine et al. (2014) indicate that micronarratives are

stories that are uniquely relevant to the members of a particular group. Micronarratives have been utilised in relation to many different topics in various disciplines to introduce and explore key ideas and themes, including social media (Venditti et al. 2017), law (Cotterill 2003), and early childhood education (Archer 2022). They have also been applied in RE (Rymarz 2023, 2024; Rymarz and Franchi 2018) to explore teachers' experiences in Catholic schools, understandings of religious diversity, and the implications of these for dialogical approaches to RE in Catholic schools.

Micronarratives were chosen for this study because they provide a unique lens to capture specific, illustrative vignettes of RE teachers' lived experiences. Unlike in-depth interviews, which aim for comprehensive probing, micronarratives distil key themes into concise, context-specific accounts. Higgins (2007) and Devine et al. (2014) suggest that micronarratives are particularly effective in exploring phenomena like subcultures as they reveal nuances that might otherwise remain hidden. For this study, micronarratives align well with the aim of uncovering the beliefs, norms, and practices shaping RE teachers' work.

Three micronarratives follow below—short vignettes derived from the first named author's interaction with Australian secondary school teachers teaching RE in Catholic schools over a number of years—and are originally from projects focusing on different issues. Each one attempts to explicate some key notions in relation to the features, histories, and status of RE in order to begin to describe this subject's subculture, and to provide an impetus for further discussion among both RE teachers and researchers. To do this, we have followed Rymarz's (2023, 2024) approach whereby the direct quotes of the RE teacher are embedded within our construction of the micronarrative, followed by a short interpretation that provides the impetus for the ensuing discussion. The names of the teachers in each micronarrative have been fictionalised.

While the three micronarratives provide valuable insight into the subcultures of RE, the limited scope of this study does not permit generalisations across all Australian Catholic secondary schools. The narratives were chosen to illustrate specific aspects of RE's subcultures and their impact on teacher identity and practice. Future research could expand upon this by adopting a larger-scale design, incorporating data from a broader range of schools and regions to explore the diversity of subcultures in RE across Australia.

3. Findings

3.1. Micronarrative 1: Malcolm

> Malcolm is teaching RE as an out-of-field subject in Years 9 and 10. This means that he does not have any formal qualifications or accreditation to teach RE in Catholic school. Due to the current teacher workforce shortage, he was asked by his school Principal if he would be willing to take this on. Wanting to help out, he agreed. Malcolm has specialisation as a Mathematics teacher. "When agreeing to take on RE, I thought I would be able to draw on lots of the pedagogical practices I use in Mathematics. But this has proved challenging. In Mathematics, my orientation emanates from more of a 'transmission' perspective. In RE, I have discovered that more of an 'interpretation' perspective is required, and this is difficult". There is another out-of-field RE teacher in the school—Sally. This teacher comes from an English background, so her interpretive perspective seems to align better with what seems to be required in RE. Malcolm says, "I find it helpful in speaking with Sally, comparing elements of my own practice with hers. She has helped me to examine what I can 'bring' from Mathematics across to RE".

Malcome's experience as an out-of-field teacher, that is, teaching a subject for which a teacher has inadequate training and qualification (Du Plessis 2020; Hobbs and Quinn 2021), highlights the organisational and socio-political factors influencing RE. The teacher shortage in Australia, particularly for specialised subjects like RE, forces schools to rely on out-of-field teaching. While this may provide opportunities for professional learning, it also exposes systemic gaps in teacher training and recruitment policies. Malcome's struggle

to adapt his pedagogical practices further underscores the need for institutional support tailored for out-of-field teachers.

3.2. Micronarrative 2: Alice

> Alice is an accredited RE teacher and has taught this subject for 20 years now across two different Catholic secondary schools. She was the School-Based Religious Education Leader but has relinquished this role as she enjoys teaching as opposed to the "administrative" tasks that come with leadership roles. But having previously taken a leadership role, she still enjoys the formative and faith-filled activities that form part of the religious life of the school, as opposed to the classroom teaching of religion, such as Liturgies, school retreats, and so on. Because of the highly secularised context of Catholic secondary schools, Alice places a high value on socialising students into the Catholic faith. As she says, "while learning about the Catholic faith is important, these kids live in a highly secularised world. For many, the Catholic school is the only experience of 'Church' they will receive. For me, RE includes education in faith, and socialisation". Due to her extensive experience, she tends to use all of these terms interchangeably, even though they each mean different things.

Alice's conflation of RE with the religious life of the school reflects the influence of secularisation on Catholic education. In an increasingly secularised society, RE teachers may feel pressured to integrate faith formation into their teaching to counteract the perceived erosion of religious values. However, this blending of ideas can dilute the academic rigor of RE and confuse its purpose. Alice's narrative highlights the importance of distinguishing RE's curriculum from the broader religious ethos of the school to preserve its academic integrity.

3.3. Micronarrative 3: Kirsty

> Kirsty is a young early-career teacher who has accreditation to teach RE. She comes from a Catholic family background and her family are well known in the local community, especially her grandparents who are regarded as stalwarts of the Church.
>
> She is well respected by her students, who see her as being able to listen and to engage them in their learning. Kirsty believes that RE is an important part of the curriculum, and that her school places a high value on this subject. But she has noticed that not all of the staff who teach RE are as "competent" as her. As she herself said, "At my school. RE is valued, but not all staff seem to share that commitment. Some prioritise their other subjects, and one colleague does not have accreditation to teach RE". (cf. Rymarz et al. 2021, p. 55)

Kirsty's observation underscores a subculture of ambiguity within her school. While institutional rhetoric promotes RE's high status, inconsistencies in teacher practices and support suggest a misalignment between ideals and lived experiences. Such discrepancies challenge the perceived value of RE and may influence both teacher morale and student engagement.

It may also reflect systemic challenges in balancing priorities across subjects. While her school places high importance on RE in principle, resource allocation and an emphasis on other curriculum priorities, such as STEM, may contribute to the undervaluing of RE in practice. This suggests that the subculture of ambiguity observed within Kirsty's school is not just a local phenomenon but may also be symptomatic of broader organisational and systemic factors.

4. Discussion

The subcultures of RE observed in this study are deeply embedded within the broader political, socio-cultural, and institutional contexts of Catholic education in Australia. Mal-

colm's experience sheds light on the socio-political pressures created by teacher shortages, and the increasing reliance of out-of-field teaching, raising questions about the preparedness and support available to teachers navigating new pedagogical and content boundaries.

Alice's narrative exemplifies the influence of secularisation on Catholic education. As schools respond to societal shifts, RE teachers may inadvertently blur the lines between curriculum and faith formation, reflecting the broader struggle of Catholic schools in balancing religious identity with contemporary educational demands.

Kirsty's narrative illustrates the systemic challenges posed by resource constraints and the prioritisation of other curriculum priorities, such as STEM. This reflects a broader tension within Catholic schools, where RE's institutional importance is often undermined by practical limitations.

In synthesising the findings, there is not one but three key subcultures that seem to shape these particular teachers' work—boundary crossings (as the result of teaching out of field), confusion (of the religious life of the school with the aims of the RE curriculum), and ambiguity (institutional rhetoric promoting RE's high status while privileging other subjects). These subcultures reflect the political, social, and organisational/institutional factors that affect schooling more broadly.

4.1. Subculture of Boundary Crossings

As an out-of-field RE teacher, Malcome's predicament is symptomatic of the global teacher shortage, notably in countries like the UK, Netherlands, France, Japan, New Zealand, the USA, and Australia (McPherson and Lampert 2024). The reasons for this are complex but include teacher burn-out, the changing nature of teachers' work and workloads, teacher status and morale, and the teaching out-of-field phenomenon (Stacey Meghan and McGrath-Champ 2022; Thompson et al. 2023). Given the impacts of this on teaching more generally, it should come as no surprise that these factors have also impacted on RE, meaning that increasingly teachers of this subject may not be accredited and may not be witnesses to Christian life as school leaders struggle to fill RE teaching positions in their schools. Such an impact is felt especially strongly in "hard-to-staff schools" (p. 13) and, in particular, schools in regional and rural areas where attracting suitably qualified teachers has been a long-standing problem.

In teaching RE as an out-of-field subject, teachers like Malcolm need to rely on the notions of boundary crossings and boundary objects. Drawn from the work of Akkerman and Bakker (2011), a boundary crossing refers to a person's transitions and interactions across different sites. Applying this to education, a boundary crossing may refer to a teacher transitioning from one subject area in which they have demonstrated skills and competencies to another in which they have no formal qualification. The subject constitutes the boundary. Thus, for an out-of-field teacher, "a boundary exists when the differences between the practices and perspectives required to teach the subject are 'discontinuous'" (Hobbs 2013, p. 274).

A boundary object refers to an artefact that fulfils a bridging function, which in terms of education is something the teacher "brings" from one particular subject to another to enable the successful teaching of that subject. Boundary objects are not necessarily "physical" artefacts (although they could be, as in the case of a teacher portfolio, or a planning schema a teacher might find helpful in different school subjects). They could include teachers' non-tangible personal resources, such as adaptive strategies, dispositions, attitudes, and so on. They could also include a teacher's support mechanisms, such as collegial sharing of ideas, or professional learning.

For teachers like Malcolm, the boundary consists of the demarcation between their in-field teaching in, for instance, Mathematics and their out-of-field teaching in RE, in which the practices and perspectives required to teach the subject are "discontinuous". There were boundary objects that Malcolm was able to bring with him to facilitate his boundary crossing from Mathematics to RE, including some of his pedagogical practices from Mathematics and the collegial support from Sally. However, while the collegial

support offered by Sally has been valuable, the interpretation perspective of RE required has been more problematic, and he has found the transmission perspective from Mathematics to be less applicable to RE.

However, and importantly, just because a teacher is technically out of field does not necessarily mean that they are ill equipped to be an effective RE teacher. If handled well and with appropriate support structures in place, such a situation could potentially provide a valuable professional learning opportunity for the teacher and may provide a pathway for formal accreditation. But there are also implications here for school leadership, and a recognition of what is involved for teachers when teaching RE out of field in terms of the feelings of preparedness, competence, and confidence. It also means that there is a need for targeted professional development for teachers like Malcolm to assist in providing such preparedness, competence, and confidence in teaching RE.

4.2. Subculture of Confusion

Alice's narrative reveals the conflation of RE with the religious life of the school, suggesting a need for clearer professional guidelines to preserve the distinctiveness of RE.

Contemporary approaches to RE clearly distinguish between the classroom teaching and learning of religion, which aligns with the National Catholic Education Commission [NCEC]'s (2018) definition of RE, and the religious life and Catholic ethos of the school community. These are two important but quite distinct notions. RE has an educative focus and is a subject with a formal curriculum for the classroom learning and teaching of religion. Opportunities for faith formation (e.g., Liturgy, prayer, and so on) are provided by the religious life of the school, which aims to promote the Catholic ethos of the school as a whole (Rymarz et al. 2021). Alice sites the secularised context of the Catholic secondary school as her rationale for focusing on the religious life of the school in her RE teaching. True, this is an issue in contemporary Catholic education. RE in Catholic schools faces unique challenges influenced by global trends towards secularism (Hall et al. 2024). However, the religious life of the school is quite distinct from RE. To treat the two as synonymous is to confuse the purpose of RE, and to potentially run the risk of proselytising in the classroom. While complex, there are other ways to address the increasingly secularised context of Catholic secondary schools. Understanding RE as a subject with a formal curriculum for the classroom learning and teaching of religion goes some way towards addressing this phenomenon (Hall et al. 2024).

It is interesting to note that this tendency to confuse, and even to equate, the religious life of the school with the classroom religion program (RE) continues to cause some confusion, even among experienced and accredited teachers of RE, like Alice (e.g., Rymarz 2006; Rymarz et al. 2021). While not all experienced RE do this, it remains nonetheless a perennial issue.

Associated with this is the tendency to use an array of different and often confusing terms to describe RE. Alice does this. Alice uses terms like "education in faith", "religious education", and "religious socialisation", but terms such as "catechesis", "faith formation", and "evangelisation" could also be added to this list. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to define each of these terms, suffice to say, they all mean something different to RE, and some are beyond the scope and indeed the role of the secondary RE teacher.

Both confusing the religious life of the school with the classroom religion program and using different terms to describe RE may result in a subculture of confusion for both students and teachers. If Alice, as an experienced and accredited RE teacher, engages in such practices, albeit with the best of intentions, it serves to confuse less experienced RE teachers with whom she works, some of whom will be looking to Alice for her leadership in this subject. The risk too is that students may come to see RE not as a serious academic discipline with a formal curriculum, but rather as a "melting pot" containing a bit of content, a bit of prayer, and a bit of Liturgy—"a bit of this and a bit of that"—the result of which is that both RE and the religious life of the school are depreciated and diluted, and neither one is afforded the status they deserve.

4.3. A Subculture of Ambiguity

Kirsty's narrative highlights the gap between policy ideals and classroom realities. This has long been an issue in education in which governing policies can both afford and constrain teachers' alignment of their work with the realities of the schools and classrooms in which they operate (e.g., Barak 2024; Edwards 2016). Such a gap calls for leadership strategies at the school level to align institutional practices with stated values.

In Kirsty's case, her school says that it places a high value on RE, aligning with the stated values of the National Catholic Education Commission [NCEC] (2018). Yet some of the practices occurring within the school (e.g., teachers, while accredited to teach RE, dedicating more time and energy to the other subjects they teach) suggest that there are competing values between RE and the prioritisation of other curriculum concerns. In Australia, there is a high priority placed on particular subjects and cross-curricular endeavours, such as STEM, in which the Australian government has urged the nation to become "STEM-ready" so that students are skilled for jobs that now require a much deeper understanding of science and technology than ever before (Bentley et al. 2022). Similarly, Australia's recent Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper (Department of Education 2023) places a high priority on, for instance, the explicit teaching of reading and writing, as well as culturally responsive teaching practices in relation to First Nations people and families. These priorities, while important, effectually complete with the value and importance of RE in the schools' curriculum. There is a limited number of hours in the school day with which to address all of these priorities, and it is inevitable that some are going to be placed above others.

All of this results in RE having what might be termed as a "subculture of ambiguity". Schools advocate one ideal (the high value and status of RE), while the lived practice of teachers teaching this subject reflects something quite different, and this can be seen by other teachers in the school, and possibly also by students. To be fair, it is quite possible that the school in Kirsty's narrative does aspire to place a high value on RE. But the practices of RE teachers that run contrary to this value need to be addressed, and the fact that they may not be currently addressed results in and reinforces a subculture of ambiguity.

This calls for leadership strategies at the school level to align institutional practices with stated values, even if there may be a number of such practices and values, acknowledging that at the same time these may compete with each other for space in the curriculum.

5. Conclusions

Through the use of micronarratives, this paper has highlighted the complex interplay between RE's subcultures and the broader socio-cultural and institutional environment. The context of RE as a school subject gives rise to not one, but to a number of different subcultures emanating from the different ways in which RE teachers experience and interpret this subject as an arena of practice. The boundary-crossing experiences of out-of-field teachers like Malcolm, the subculture of confusion illustrated by Alice, and the subculture of ambiguity observed by Kirsty all point to systemic challenges within Catholic education, including a degree of misalignment between policy and practice.

Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts at multiple levels. School leaders must align institutional practice with the high status accorded to RE in policy documents, ensuring consistent support for teachers. At the same time, Catholic Schools' Offices need to prioritise the development of resources, mentoring, and professional learning programs tailored to the unique needs of RE teachers, including those teaching out of field. Schools need to become conversant with the subcultures of RE to better orient and support teachers, fostering a more cohesive and effective teaching environment.

Broader societal factors, such as secularisation and the current teacher workforce shortage, must also be acknowledged and addressed through systemic reforms in teacher recruitment, accreditation, and support.

While this particular study was limited in that it considered only three micronarratives to distil some key points on which to elaborate, future research could explore these

dynamics in more detail, over time, and across varied geographical locations (e.g., urban and rural locations) to deepen understanding of how RE subcultures evolve and influence teacher identity and practices.

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Article

SOMETHING IS NOT WORKING! REIMAGINING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TODAY'S CATHOLIC SCHOOL: The All Black Culture, The Samaritan Woman at the Well, the ANZAC Mythology and the Crucial Importance of Formative Contexts

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Abstract: This article explores the pressing issue of the re-imagination of Religious Education in today's Catholic school. It does so within the context of the plenary re-imagination of the contemporary Catholic school itself, a work-in-progress to which it has both a complementary and a symbiotic relationship. In doing so, the author draws upon sources as diverse as the anthropological lessons at the heart of the powerful and inspiring All Blacks Rugby code, the ANZAC Tradition and the narrative of the surprisingly transformative encounter of the Samaritan woman with Jesus at Jacob's well in the Gospel of John (Jn 4:4–42). The Aparecida Document (2007) issued by the Episcopal Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) under the leadership of the then-Cardinal Bergoglio prior to his elevation to the Papacy and his adoption of the Pontifical name, 'Francis' (2013) provides a compass to find the way forward, not only for the Church itself but for Catholic Schools within its embrace. This article examines the potential power of the seminal integration of Religious Education within the plenary and daily narrative of the whole school, the liberating perspective gained through the re-defining and re-owning of it as 'the work of the whole educative village' and the acceptance of the responsibilities and challenges that this seismically challenging conceptual shift will necessarily bring.

Keywords: religious education; educational village; Aparecida; Catholic school today

1. Firstly—Why Is There a Need to Reimagine Religious Education?

The short answer, examining the experiential evidence in Religious Education classrooms today, would be that 'Something Isn't Working'. The vast rupture that clearly exists in mandated Religious Education programs today between the classroom endeavours of even very well trained, enthusiastic and devoted teachers and the students before them is immense. The task of engaging today's students through the lenses of true but abstrusely expressed dogmas and doctrines is akin to trying to open their eyes to the wonders of the cosmos through the lens of Galileo Galilei's 1609 refracting telescope. There is a profoundly daunting chasm that separates the experiential, and therefore the 'real', world of the students as they perceive it and the pedagogical world in which the teacher finds herself or himself labouring.[1]

Religious Education programs, like the Catholic schools in which they are grounded, are shaped and moulded by a range of contextual considerations. These determine their meaning, shape and purpose as well as the several challenges which both Catholic Schools and their constituent Religious Education programs confront. In a previous era in the Australasian socio-cultural narrative, the Christian religion held a place of importance and influence in the social, and even the national political, hierarchy. It was held in such importance that religious divisions and differences could be the cause of bitter sectarian rivalry, which was a part of a sometimes tragic, but very often sad, historical narrative.

Even the dominant, the 'Invincible' Australian Cricket team at its post-war zenith was, anecdotes would suggest, not immune.

In that internecine denominational context, meaning and purpose for Religious Education were found in defining and delineating the often finer points of sectarian doctrines. In fact, the underlying purpose of all dogma has always been to define, delineate and differentiate. Its purpose was to separate and to distinguish. Its eventual effect was to divide. Religious Education programs predicated upon that same dogmatic foundation were consequently themselves didactic, differentiating and catechismal.

Furthermore, the typical cathecismal form of instruction (particularly in its common question-and-answer form) largely assumed existing affiliation and attachment to a tradition and, therefore, sought to strengthen, support and confirm a fiducial attachment that already existed. They were not evangelical. Identifying terms such as 'The One True Church', ironically the very antithesis of the literal meaning of 'Catholic', were both claimed and proclaimed by Mother Church. The vehemence of the struggle—still in the living memory of some—has now subsided in an external context of social indifference and an internal recognition of the need for a unifying graciousness and acceptance of difference.

Two factors warrant mentioning briefly here. Firstly, the underlying ecclesial anthropology, critical in understanding the historical assumptions surrounding the nature and purpose of Religious Education, was based on the belief that eternal salvation had been won for humanity by the salvific death of Christ upon the cross. This belief became foundational to Christianity. The soteriological algorithm was the core creedal understanding of Christianity—and Catholicism saw itself and the schools it sponsored as uniquely defined by it (Divini Illius Magistri, n. 26) (PIUS XI n.d.).

The second factor deserving mention was that these programs of religious instruction were able, however accurately or inaccurately, to assume familial religious affiliation. They took for granted, not without some justification, regular familial religious practice and the question-and-answer Catechism, known colloquially amongst Catholics as the 'Sixpenny Catechism' or the 'Green Catechism' in the 1950s, became symbolic of generational continuity of fidelity to the 'Faith of our Fathers' even in the face of death, which Faber's (1849) anthemic hymn extolled. Reinforcing this sense of loyalty and unquestioned fidelity was seen as the Catholic school's strong supporting role to the work of the family and parish.

However, for a complex of reasons which sociologists and historians struggle to explain (Marwick 1998), those seeming socio-religious certainties and the inherited presumptions they carried broke down. They were swept away in the years immediately following the Second World War and no shared socio-cultural meaning system arose to take their place (Wilkie-Jans 2019; Mackay 2020). Marwick's 'Long 60s' took an irreversible toll.

Figure 1 below sets out the phenomenon of the rupture of religio-cultural contextual connections and the resultant loss of Catholic identity that ensued.

The goals of any program of Religious Education in the Catholic school today must be directed towards the healing of these key ruptures in contextual connection in young people and towards the restoration of the quintessential narrative of faith. It is about rekindling an attachment to—perhaps even a love for—the story.

Our story is not a narrative we relate. . . it is a reality we live.

The Author

Even a brief survey of the current context of Religious Education programs in Catholic schools reveals the extent of the resultant challenges to Religious Education today. Any of the multiple calibrations of shifting norms and patterns available, which it is not necessary to record comprehensively here, would demonstrate:

- the sharp statistical decrease of those nominating 'Christian' as their religion of affiliation in Australian Commonwealth census figures;
- the concomitant rise of those opting for 'No Religion' in census data;
- the positive increase in the cultural awareness of indigenous and other religions;

- the ascendency of secularism and atheism in contemporary society;
- the decrease of the percentage of Catholic students in Catholic schools;
- the concomitant increase of enrolment of students of other religions or of 'no religion' in Catholic schools;
- the notable increase of Catholic students being enrolled in higher fee-paying non-Catholic independent schools;
- the changing profile of Catholic school staff with similar trends to those noted above amongst students;
- the accompanying decrease, or even disappearance of clergy and professed religious, both male and female engaged in Catholic education;
- the widely changing socio-cultural and religious demographic due, in part, to broad national and international patterns of migration.

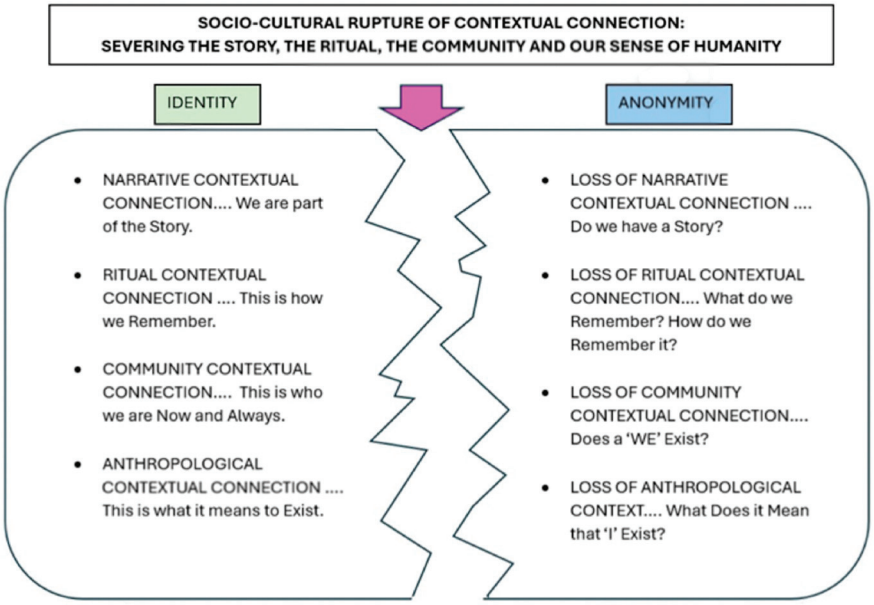

Figure 1. The Rupture of Religious Contextual Connections in Post-War Culture.

All of these factors add to the complex nature of an evolving society within which Catholic schools, and their undertaking of Religious Education, must function. It is clear that the contemporary context of Religious Education in today's Catholic school demands a fundamental process of **reimagining**. How the school conceives of that special educational project which has been an integral part of its life since its establishment calls for profound renewal. This, in turn, requires a concomitant reimagining of the very nature of the contemporary Catholic school itself (Mellor 2024, in publication) within which the Religious Education project resides. The crucial element of that reimagining is a renewed anthropology.

2. In the Light of Christian Humanism—The Anthropological Power of the ANZAC Mythyology and the All Black Culture: Better Human Beings Make...

Anthropology is the key issue in the reimagining and the consequent reformation of the Catholic educational endeavour and, therefore, of Religious Education within it. In fact, anthropology is at the very heart—despite the sad fact that it usually remains unarticulated with any precision—of any collective social endeavour or movement, of political ideals, or, indeed, of anything that tends to have the capacity to define or motivate a society or a group within that society. The often underestimated power of anthropology rises to the fore.

For example, in 1915, as the early years of the 20th Century unfolded, in the dawn darkness of an April morning, on a rugged escarpment of the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey, the 600 m long beach now known as ANZAC Cove witnessed the blood-stained birth

of what was to become a formative anthropological phenomenon in both Australia and New Zealand. Out of abject defeat, death and the sheer pain-filled loss of thousands of young, vibrant lives, a formative anthropological mythology was conceived. It remains still, despite the nuanced tones in which it might be distilled in the two nations' mythology. Ideals of humanity that enshrined self-sacrifice, courageous compassion, resilience and care were born. The belief arose that this is what being a good and decent human being was all about. It enshrined the values of self-giving, loyalty, courage and care for others in the national soul. An anthropology was born. It is still called 'The ANZAC Spirit'.

On a different 'battlefield' in the latter decades of the 20th Century, seventy-two years later, when professionalism entered the sanctum of the theretofore strictly amateur game of Rugby Union and the World Cup was first played in 1987, the leadership of New Zealand's All Blacks examined critically and closely their way forward into the new age of the game. They chose to go to the very roots of the much-loved pursuit and articulated a lofty vision—the effectiveness of which cannot be gainsaid. The vision for the revered game was neither tactical nor structural but, more importantly and above all else, essentially human. The renewing vision enunciated that the key to the future sustenance and success of the code was essentially anthropological. It lay in the people who played it. Success would be founded upon an anthropological choice. It was tied, in the ideal, to issues of character and to issues of exacting personal and team standards. James Kerr explored this comprehensively in his book 'Legacy' (Kerr 2013). At the heart of this book, related to understanding the keys to success, is the powerful mantra that enshrines the belief that 'Better People Make Better All Blacks'. In other words, it is character that determines destiny. Character promotes commitment and resilience and elevates teamwork. It values service to the team's shared ideals. The wisdom of this conviction is beyond question. The continuing effectiveness of its implementation is beyond doubt.

To paraphrase, in pursuit of the present discussion of the work of Religious Education, at the very quintessence of Christianity lies the same incarnational anthropological conviction that '**Better Human Beings make. . .Better Human Beings**'. The core teaching of the Gospels is that a human life truly lived in goodness—lived in kindness, forgiveness, gentleness, courage, selflessness, compassion—is the indispensable pith of Christianity (cf. Gal 5:22). Striving to be a better human being is the core meaning of Christianity itself. It is the very meaning of the Incarnation. This is Christianity's essential dogma and the first one that should be taught with all of its implications for living. Ironically, it is an anthropological dogma that unifies rather than divides and differentiates.

For much of the Western world, the loss of the potency and relevance of the soteriological algorithm, the conviction that the sacrificial death of Jesus upon the cross and its underlying anthropology of a fallen yet redeemed humanity, has left an anthropological void which has proven difficult to fill. Perhaps the scarifying experience of the lived reality of humankind's fallen state as well as its unprecedented capacity for its own immolation was too deeply and too painfully embedded in the human psyche in the first half of the 20th Century. Perhaps two irreparably destructive global conflicts and the accompanying exposure of the innate capacity of humanity for abject and unspeakable cruelty to other humans and of the burgeoning of an anthropological creed, evil both in its intent and practice, meant that redemption seemed beyond belief in the 20th Century's second five decades. Perhaps those iconic, fleeting, halcyon moments on Max Yasgur's farm at Woodstock, NY in August 1969 with their evanescent Edenic overtones were a 'cry from the human soul' for a redeeming return to 'The Garden'. However, for all that, perhaps a new understanding of human meaning and purpose can be found today in the papal teaching of a renewed and renewing vision of humanity based upon the rich and pregnant understanding of Christian humanism.

3. Christian Humanism: A New Context for the Catholic School and therefore, for Religious Education

In its simplest understanding, Christian humanism is a foundational understanding of human living that, sharing much with contemporary secular humanism itself, aspires to the highest standards of a virtuous human life and includes the fostering of right relationships with other human beings, with our own deepest selves, with this Earth and with the Sacred Mystery. The core belief of Christian humanism is that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is the complete model of a virtuous human life, being one 'who has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (Heb 4:15 NRSV). Christian humanism, as proclaimed by successive pontiffs, begins from the quintessential incarnational premise of Christianity and thus, holds all of human existence to be sacred. It cherishes the belief that every human being is graced with the presence of the Divine Mystery within. That is its profound and essential premise. No barriers of race, of creed, of gender, of belief can diminish or negate that premise. As St Paul liberatingly proclaims: '*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*' (Gal 3:28). The Spirit dwells within every human being. Religious Education begins. . .and in a sense, ends, with that belief (Rohr 2019). **This is the anthropological foundation of Christianity—that all people, all human beings are the dwelling place of the Sacred.**

It is this belief that defines today's Catholic school. The 'embrace' of the Catholic school in the midst of plurality and diversity is exactly that—it is literally 'catholic'—universal and holistic in the authentic sense of leading all its students, all its leaders and all its community towards that wholeness which is found in the realization of the completeness within in the sacred indwelling of the Divine (Mellor 2024, *in publication*). That is its challenge. . .and its privilege.

4. THE APARECIDA DOCUMENT: A New Context for Religious Education

A reimagining of today's Catholic school, particularly in the light of a Christian humanist perspective, not only creates a new context for Religious Education but provides a renewed ground for reshaping and reconceiving it. The Aparecida Document (Concluding Document 2007) of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, to which the then-Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio had contributed prior to his election to the papacy in 2013, provides fertile ground for such a reconceiving. As Pope Francis, the former Archbishop Bergoglio found inspiration in the 2007 episcopal document which, in turn, later shaped the apostolic exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium (Francis 2014).

4.1. Addressing 'Those Who No Longer Walk with Us'

The Aparecida Document, named after the Brazilian city in *Sao Paulo* from which it was issued, was specifically and poignantly addressed 'to those who no longer walk with us', an outgoing and reconciliatory focus which has come to mark Francis' papacy. The document, issued during the pontificate of Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, outlined four ecclesial 'axes' of renewal (n. 226). These essential points for renewal of the Church at large also consequentially outline the vision for the reimagining of the contemporary Catholic school within that renewing *Ecclesia*. In so doing, they announce the paradigm for the reshaping of Religious Education within those 'Privileged Places' which are today's changing and evolving Catholic schools.

The four 'axes' of renewal point to a future Church, and therefore, to its future schools, as places where faith is first to be experienced before it is to be understood, to be felt before it is delineated and to be loved before it is defined. The bishops of the Caribbean and of Latin America, in setting the compass points by which the 'Barque of Peter' might navigate a new future in uncertain seas, offered the Church and its schools four cardinal points by which to navigate the future.

The future of Religious Education, which is indisputably a work of the total school community—or the privilege of the 'whole village' to cite the well-known axiom—is inextricably bound up primarily with the experience of being part of that community,

part of a truly formative, and potentially transformative, 'village'. Every single person plays a part. This truism is at the heart of the renewal of Religious Education today. It is quintessentially a question of experiencing, and of being invited into, faith. Crucially it is the story of formative experience. This is the core meaning of Figure 2.

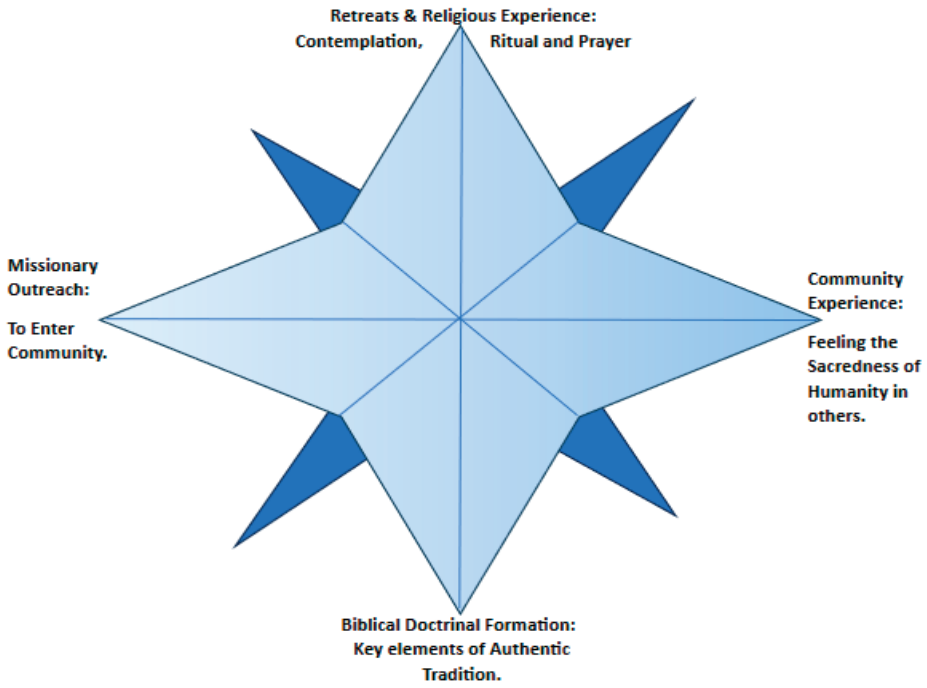

Figure 2. The Four Axes of Renewal.

The four salient points of renewal can be represented in Figure 2 below.

4.2. THE CONTEXT OF THE FOUR AXES OF RENEWAL: Reimagining Religious Education as a Living Element Within a Formative Culture of Encounter

The reimagining of Religious Education is a question of context much more than it is a matter of content. In fact, a didactic concern for content matters little if the environmental reality is not authentically lived and, therefore, encountered. A living environment of encounter has the potential to redress that 'anonymity', that separation from The Story (see Figure 1) and its accompanying nameless 'atheism' by default, by dislocation, by disaffection or by disillusionment. It is an 'atheism' that only living and authentic human encounter can redress.

The Aparecida Vision enunciates four salient, and essentially incarnational, premises:

- It speaks of **authentic religious experience** which is far from, and diametrically opposed to, superficial piosity. It speaks of that touching of the human spirit at its deepest core wherein lives the 'Ruah', the Divine Breath, implanted within every human being. It speaks of encounter and it also implies the critical importance of ritual that is meaningful and which speaks firstly to the heart;
- It speaks of **Living Community**, with all its human frailty and brokenness, a community to which all are welcome;
- It speaks of **Doctrinal Formation**—of 'telling the Christian Story', which is part of the story of all humanity. Its core is creedal—the concise expressions of belief, unadorned, pithy, and clear. They answer the question: 'What is it Christians hold to be true?' However, the content of any Religious Education curriculum matters little if it is not primarily a living reality in the core culture of the school;
- It speaks of **Missionary Outreach**, of living the Word in the World.

4.3. THE INVITATION TO 'REJOIN THE STORY'

All four of these are, in essence, about the invitation to rejoin the Story from which we have become disconnected. It is essentially the 'Story of what Human Life really means' understood in terms of the Incarnational Presence of Jesus among us. The fourfold invitation to participate in that defining life Story will now be examined here.

5. RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: The First Core Element of Renewed Religious Education

This first focus of renewal and authenticity asks that the Catholic school, as an embodiment of the Catholic tradition, should offer the opportunity for a '*profound and intense religious* experience. . .and (of) personal witness' (Aparecida n. 226).

What Is 'Religious Experience'?

In 2015, Pope Francis expanded upon this theme in addressing the participants of the Fifth Congress of the Italian Church in Florence. He built upon the core concept of Christian Humanism and proposed a deeper and more practical understanding. He said:

> "I do not want to outline here in the abstract a 'new humanism', a certain idea of the human being, but simply to present some characteristics of Christian humanism, which is that of the 'sentiments of Christ Jesus' (Phil 2: 5). These are not temporary abstract sensations of the soul, but the warm inner strength that makes us capable of living and making decisions. It presents the three characteristics of the new humanism: humility, selflessness and beatitude. These traits impede the obsession with power."
>
> (Papa Francisco (2015) Encuentro con los participantes en el V congreso de la iglesia italiana)

The 'profound and intense religious experience' among the *desiderata* of an authentic Catholic school is, therefore, an intense human experience of humility, selflessness and beatitude. It would include the potency of ritual. What the community chooses to celebrate and how it ritualises those realities is a powerful gauge of what is important to it. It is a key means of reconnecting from 'Anonymity' to 'Identity'. Ritual essentially tells 'The Story' in a way that, sometimes even wordlessly, invites the community into transformative connection with that Story.

Ritual is the 'flesh' that completes the 'bones' of human religious experience. It is crucially and primarily about Identity. The capacity of Ritual to touch the human spirit is a force that can transform experience into deep and abiding spiritual memory.

> *Speaking about a Catholic education is equivalent to speaking about the human. . .about humanism.*
>
> *(Pope Francis 2015)*

6. COMMUNITY LIFE: The Second Core Element of Renewed Religious Education

Secondly, the Document speaks of the aspiration to form a welcoming community where (students and their families) 'are accepted fraternally and feel valued, visible, and included'.

Such communities are eloquent articulations of the 'Good News', the Kerygma, in which the Spirit of Christ finds a home. It is this communal experience which has the necessary power to heal the rupture of the Communal Contextual Connection referred to in Figure 1 above and to reverse the loss of identity that succumbs to anonymity.

The implications of this are that, in the complexities and pluralities of the life of the modern Catholic school community, there is no outer 'Court of the Gentiles'. All are one and whilst the Catholic tradition is steadfastly honoured and upheld, there is genuine acknowledgement of that truth which is found in every tradition that seeks that which is good. There is found, thus, in the Catholic tradition, a warm welcome not only to 'those who no longer walk with us' but also to those who have not yet found any path upon which to walk at all. Respect begets Respect and Identity begets Identity.

7. BIBLICAL AND DOCTRINAL FORMATION: The Third Core Element of Renewed Religious Education

Along with a strong religious experience and notable community life, students (and their families as far as possible) need to deepen knowledge of the Word of God and the contents of the Faith. . .not as theoretical and cold knowledge but within the context of spiritual, personal and community growth (cf. Aparecida n. 226).

Fides Quaerens Intellectum?

St. Anselm of Canterbury's (1033–1109) dictum, used for the first time in his Proslogion (Discourse), describes theology as 'Faith seeking Understanding'. Critically, it begins with Faith. It assumes Faith. Doctrine or what might be described as 'distilled theological reflection' is the stuff of catechismal teaching. It assumes faith and it assumes something of religious affiliation as starting points.

Manifestly, the Catholic school of today cannot make these assumptions. This is yet another reason for the urgency of a plenary reimagining of Religious Education in the contemporary Catholic school.

The third axis of formative Religious Education involves exploration of the core elements of the Catholic tradition and its formative and essential relationship to human existence. Along with a strong communal spirit and the accessibility of truly religious experience, the exploration of those key truths and their revealed wisdom, which can be called authentically 'Catholic', form an integral part of the life of the contemporary Catholic school. The Creedal statements of the Church, the Apostles' Creed, and the Nicene Creed, among them, offer clear statements of the doctrinal heart of Christian Faith.

Yet, whilst 'religious knowledge' and its associated understandings have historically been foregrounded as the core of Religious Education, the contemporary Catholic school understands that knowledge of a religious tradition finds its full value today when it is joined to that broad river of 'Lived Truth' which flows towards the embrace of the Universal Sacred Mystery, a part of a transformational communal searching for 'The Good and The True'.

8. MISSIONARY COMMITMENT OF THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY: The Fourth Core Element of Renewed Religious Education

The fourth axis of reimagining of Religious Education today is:

> the shared missionary commitment to those beyond the community, to those who are afar (a commitment which is) concerned about their situation.
>
> (cf. Aparecida n. 226)

This commitment to the wellbeing of others, including those beyond the community and beyond identity, is at the core of the Gospels. Compassion, like the quality of Shakespeare's 'Mercy', brings blessings to all. It blesses both the heart that shows compassion as well as the one to whom compassion is shown (cf. The Merchant of Venice, Act 4. Sc 1) (Shakespeare 2003).

A comprehensive experience of Religious Education in the contemporary Catholic school will include exposure to, and participation in, undertakings which reach out to those in real need of the experience of kindness and practical generosity. Such experiences form the human spirit in what is the heart of Christian Humanism. They have the power to be transformative. A brief exploration of the dialogic essence of Transformative Experience may assist this discussion.

8.1. THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL: A REIMAGINING OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TODAY AS PART OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER WITHIN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

John's account of the meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well near Sychar (Jn 4:4–42) is a definitive example of the power of formative experience. The

dialogue between Jesus and the woman—another key perspective for the life of the Catholic school today—allows for formation through experience and encounter.

This formative experience can then blossom into a transformative one. It is the experience of encounter and dialogue, more than instruction, which nurtures the environment for transformation at Jacob's Well in Samaria on that hot noon day, for the possibility of what James Fowler, almost two millennia later, would call his sixth and highest stage of Faith Development—'Universalising Faith':

> "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . .But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. . .God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."
>
> (Jn 4:4–42 passim. NRSVCE)
>
> *Faith, universal, encompassing and truly human, is about Spirit and Truth. That which embraces Spirit and that which teaches Truth is the heart of authentic Religious Education, wherever and whenever it is found.*
>
> *(The Author)*

The above reflections point to a way forward for the reimagining and the concomitant renewal of Religious Education in the contemporary reimagined Catholic School.

8.2. SUMMARY: The Reimagined Catholic School of Today

- **Firstly**, the work of Religious Formation, of which the didactic exercise of Religious Education forms only a part, is the endeavour of the *whole school*.

Every staff member, every leader, has a role to play. It is an integral part of the work of the totality of the Catholic school.

Figure 3 below illustrates the various elements which comprise the religiously formative nature of the Catholic school. The variegated reality is reflective of the fact that there are many parts to the human process of formation and education. In the religious life of the Catholic school—and a feature which is its quintessentially defining element—every community member has a role to play. Education is the work of the 'whole village'.

Figure 3. Some of the Pieces that Make Up Religious Education.

In seeing the Religious Education lesson for what it really is—simply the didactic piece of an encompassing and multifarious endeavor—the reimagined Catholic school finds ways to become what its modern socio-cultural context both calls it to be and allows the freedom for it to become. It is a place which, above all, creates, in the midst of its

human, fragile, failed yet sometimes joyous struggles, a place where the Sacred Mystery made manifest in Jesus the Nazarene would feel welcome and would recognize as 'home'.

The Catholic school's formative mission is at the heart of every subject, of every element of the school's daily routine, and it is a quintessential part of every encounter between mentor and student. In fact, it is the interpersonal encounter, however incidental it may seem, within which the sacramentality of the Catholic school exists (Mellor 2024, *in publication*).

Moreover, the teaching of every element of the curriculum by every teacher in every lesson, from the Christian Humanist perspective, has a much broader formative effect. The positivity and respectfulness of relationships and the unrelenting setting of standards for teacher and student alike are religiously educative:

> *"…proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."*
>
> *(2Tim 4:2)*

This formative responsibility is something from which no teacher, in any capacity within the school, can resile:

> Christian Humanists believe one can combine Christian faith and an authentic relationship with God, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, secular knowledge. Human talents, intellect, and creativity are viewed as God-given and to be developed to their fullest.
>
> (Sullivan 2013, p. 1)

- **Secondly**, the 'profound and intense religious experience' which is an axis of the development of the Catholic school is bound up with the understanding that the Sacred can be revealed everywhere and at all times in all things, as taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556).

8.3. Finding God in All Things

The ritualising of life experience in ways rich in meaning can be a vital part in assisting students to be open to the intensity of religious experience and to the meeting with the Sacred within that experience. Finding time and contemplative space for ritual and preparing it well is a priority in the life of the authentic Catholic school. Recalibrating the time set aside in the school calendar for developing contemplative experience in comparison to the exercise of didactic praxis may prove helpful. It may take time, but it can flourish!

The practice of Ritual at specific times and in specific places assists the human spirit to grow to that openness and sensitivity to the Sacred Presence in all things that surround and pervade human life everywhere and in everything.

- **Thirdly**, the building of an authentic, warm, and welcoming community is both an obligation and a privilege for the whole school.

8.4. Better Human Beings Make…Better Human Beings

This is something which can happen both informally as well as in structured ways. Importantly, being open at every level to the nurturing of the three hallmarks of Christian Humanism—humility, selflessness, and beatitude—allows for their growth. It is these three characteristics which support an atmosphere of welcome and inclusion, so vital to the truly Catholic school.

- **Fourthly**, there exists **an evident and powerful need for staff formation** if the contemporary Catholic school is to survive. All staff, all leaders, all aspiring leaders, at both pre-service and in-service levels, need to have a clear understanding of both today's challenges and today's compass points for future growth. A sound and resilient understanding of the shared and inescapable responsibility of every teacher and every leader to be part of the transformative future is a universal need.

9. Conclusions

It cannot be gainsaid that the changing contexts of the Catholic school have both wrought challenges and have brought change to the school's threshold and have raised essential questions about purpose and meaning into the future. Those same contexts have brought similar and consequential challenges and questions to the undertaking of Religious Education.

The foundational anthropological and theological premises which shaped and directed it have altered irreversibly. What is of critical importance is that all Catholic school staff, including all their leaders, seek and are assisted to find clarity of direction in their challenging and evolving task. Perhaps the foregoing has assisted in some small way.

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Notes

[1] All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE). 1989. National Council of the Churches of Christ.

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Article

Why There Is a Place for Dialogue in Religious Education Today

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Abstract

Recognising the plural nature of classrooms in Australia, this article explores the importance of using dialogue within Religious Education classes. We explore the characteristics and learning styles of young people and provide students' ideas about Religious Education gathered from small focus groups of students aged 10–18. We also provide students' ideas about God, gathered from survey responses, that could be deepened through a dialogical approach. Finally, we explore ways for teachers to incorporate a dialogical teaching and learning approach within a catechetical, didactic curriculum.

Keywords: dialogue; religious education; student voice; pedagogy and curriculum

1. Introduction and Overview

> "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:22–23).

In exploring dialogue in Religious Education (RE) today, this article considers the characteristics, needs, and desires of the students in the classroom for the world they are living in. With the move in some dioceses back to a kerygmatic, catechetical approach to RE, we would argue that now more than ever there is a need for dialogue within the pedagogy. The diversity of classrooms in Australia and the nature of young people today, and the world they live in, highlights the need for and importance of dialogue.

The concept of dialogue in teaching is not new (Cui and Teo 2020). Since the time of Socrates (470-399 BCE), teaching through asking and answering questions has been a pedagogy encouraging critical thinking and development of ideas. Contemporary education continues to use dialogue to foster learning. In the RE classroom, this dialogical methodology reflects the synodal nature of Church Pope Francis is calling for (Marmion 2021). Synodality requires dialogue, which involves mutual listening, creating a space where every student can be heard and respected.

The document, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, from the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, commonly referred to as the Synod on Synodality (Francis 2024), saw synodality as transforming situations including educational institutions, to make them more participatory, inclusive, and mission-driven. Further the document underscores the importance of listening to children. "The voice of the child is needed by the community. We must listen to children and make efforts to ensure that everyone in society listens to them, especially those who have political and educational responsibilities" (Francis 2024, n. 61). Strengthening dialogical teaching practices particularly using synodal processes enables students to practice meaningful

dialogue. This hopefully provides them with the confidence and skills so that they can be heard. A Church can better respond to contemporary challenges and fulfil its mission of evangelization if all members are participating in dialogue.

While we see dialogue as essential for both catechesis and evangelization, it is also essential for humanity and the development of a peaceful and compassionate world (Admirand 2019). Recent wars in Ukraine and Palestine highlight the important role of dialogue on the international stage. Closer to home, the recent walkout at a graduation ceremony, because people did not like the views of the occasional speaker, demonstrates a lack of tolerance for people with opposing views. For greater cooperation and tolerance of others, the skills of dialogue and reflection need to be developed in the classroom. As well as acknowledging the importance of dialogue for our world, it has been found that students prefer to engage in classes which are dialogical (Diocese of Sandhurst Review Committee 2018).

How do we understand dialogue?

Dialogue is seen as an essential skill for young people to enable them to exist in our complex world of interconnections (TBIGC 2017). Dialogue is an interchange between two people where each learns from the other (TBIGC 2017). It is described as an encounter where people come to understand each other's lives, values, and beliefs (TBIGC 2017). To be able to dialogue, students need to learn the skills of respecting, listening, speaking clearly and confidently, explaining their beliefs and points of view, critical thinking, reflecting, responding, questioning, cooperation, global awareness, religious literacy, and living with difference (TBIGC 2017).

Dialogical approaches in the general classroom have been found to positively support the learning and engagement of students, encourage deeper thinking, student-initiated questions, and multiple perspectives (Oldehaver 2023). They also enable the incorporation of culturally relevant materials and multiple modes of communication, which can be particularly effective in diverse classrooms (Oldehaver 2023). Studies have found that secondary students who were taught to use dialogical discussion practices showed higher levels of interaction and engagement. This increased interaction was linked to better learning outcomes and greater student involvement (Davies and Meissel 2018). More specifically, in the RE classroom the use of dialogic space supports the exploration of relationships and encourages a participatory and egalitarian learning environment (Moate 2011). Evaluation of the use of dialogic strategies in a secondary school RE classroom found that dialogic teaching facilitated better teacher–student and student–student interactions, fostering critical thinking and engagement (Vrikki et al. 2019).

Pope Francis spoke of the importance of a "culture of dialogue" in his address to Catholic Schools and Universities (Francis 2017). While exploring Catholic Identity, the Congregation for Catholic Education also emphasised the importance of dialogue for the promotion of a peaceful society (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022). Dialogue was identified as an essential part of Catholic schools, with its roots in the dialogue of the Trinity, the dialogue between God and people, and the dialogue between people (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022). The congregation identified identity formation, respect for diversity, understanding others, self-expression, trust and harmony, and the transformation of "competition into cooperation" as the fruits of authentic dialogue (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022). It could be argued that dialogue, and specifically interreligious dialogue, is part of the evangelizing mission of the Catholic church and Catholic school and has been specifically since Vatican II (Engebretson 2009). As we enrol students of all faiths and no faith, dialogue can promote humility, sincerity, and honesty amongst students and teachers engaging in mutual listening and learning (Admirand 2019). This dialogue can support students' exploration of the meaning of life and of living together and the formation of their own identities (Boeve 2019). In the Catholic school it is essential that the

Christian voice is included, offering a particular lens with which to explore the world and relationships, not just a narrow set of values (Boeve 2019).

The world and education today

The traditional model of schooling developed during the industrial revolution was to prepare children for work within nation-states. This one-sided instructional model of schooling is not adequate to prepare children for a world which is volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (Andersen 2020). Due to technology and travel, children now live in a globalised and much more connected world and have greater access to information (Cush and Robinson 2014).

It is tempting to think that a didactic Catechetical approach which was successful in the "glory days" of the early twentieth century might reverse the trend of young people not participating formally in the practices of the Catholic Church; however, the students being educated today are very different to those in Catholic schools at that time. According to the National Catholic Education Commission, from humble beginnings over 200 years ago, Australia's 1756 Catholic schools now educate 820,000 or one in five Australian students and employ over 112,000 staff.[1] Today around 32.5% of all Australian students are educated in faith-based schools, and Catholic schools are the major provider of faith-based education in the country, enrolling about 60% of students in the non-government sector. Approximately 40% of students in Catholic schools in Australia are not of the Catholic religion.

Based on recent research conducted by KU Leuven in Victorian schools, along with data from the National Catholic Life Survey and the census, it is evident that current RE efforts aimed at evangelisation and fostering commitment to the Catholic Church are largely unsuccessful for most students. To become active and responsible community members, students need to learn how to engage in dialogue with people who hold different opinions (Admirand 2019).

In considering the RE curriculum and pedagogy, we need to consider the type of education Australian schools have been encouraged to provide over the last couple of decades. In the Adelaide Education Declaration (DETYA 2000), The Melbourne Education declaration (MCEETYA 2008), and the Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Education Declaration (DESE 2019), goals have encouraged schools to develop learners who are confident, creative, active, questioning, inquisitive, and experimental. Students are supported to "think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way" (MCEETYA 2008). In the most recent declaration, students are to be taught to "engage in respectful debate on a diverse range of views" (DESE 2019).

The Australian Curriculum includes the general capability of critical and creative thinking (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2022).

> "Critical thinking involves students analysing and assessing possibilities against criteria for judgement. They construct and evaluate arguments, and use information, evidence and logic to draw reasoned conclusions and to solve problems".

> "Creative thinking involves students learning to generate and apply new ideas, and see existing situations in new ways. They identify alternative explanations and possibilities, and create new links to generate successful outcomes".

Since students are encouraged to think critically, ask questions, and apply reason and judgment across their curriculum areas, it is reasonable to assume they will want to use these skills also in RE. However, without proper guidance and information, their reasoning in this subject will be limited. Therefore, when designing classroom pedagogy, we need to consider how to create a multi-faith learning community.

Although primarily considered at the tertiary level, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition emphasizes "the conviction that faith and reason are mutually illuminating and that each

discipline offers the potential to reveal the sacred" (Boston College 2025). The curriculum and pedagogy of primary and secondary schools needs to prepare students to engage with theology and philosophy in the search for meaning.

Who are young people and how do they learn?

Setting aside the question of curriculum content for the moment, let us examine who we are educating and how they learn. To design an effective curriculum and pedagogy in any subject area, it is crucial to consider not only the material to be taught, but also the characteristics of the learners and the perceptions of the educators (Drummond 1998). There are several ways of perceiving childhood and these impact the type of education they receive (Dillen 2015). From an international perspective, children and young people under the age of 18 have several rights, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which Australia became a signatory to in 1990 (United Nations 1990). These include:

Article 12: Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 14: Children have the right to think and believe what they want and to practice their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Parents should guide children on these matters.

Article 29: Education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full. It should encourage children to respect their parents, their cultures, and other cultures. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national, and religious groups, and persons of indigenous origin.

Children do not come to school as empty vessels or "not yet adults" but rather as competent subjects with knowledge, wisdom, questions, beliefs, and experiences (Dillen 2015). Young people today are looking for personal choice, freedom, flexibility, and an expectation that things will not stay the same (Dillen 2007). Childhood is a social construction which in Australia is currently impacted by globalisation, secularism, and pluralism.[2] As well as the impact of culture, children are impacted by the educational choices made by governments, teachers, and school leaders. Given the hopes and expectations of the ministers of education over recent years, as outlined above, what do the students in the classrooms today want and expect?

Christian and Jewish students involved in research in the UK indicated that their religion classes stereotyped and misrepresented religions and presented religion in a very boring manner (Moulin 2011). They complained that religious studies did not present religion in a contemporary and meaningful way. A key concern of students in the UK study was about being picked on for their religion, indicating the need for all students to have the skills of dialogue. In recent years, considerable attention has been given to student voices. Pope Francis in his address to schools and universities said: "It is necessary to listen to the young: the 'work of the ear'. Listen to the young!" (Francis 2017, p. 2). Student voice and agency begins as young as early childhood education (Grajczonek 2015).

2. Student Voice

2.1. Study 1: What Young People in Australia Say About RE

So, what do young people in Australia say about RE? As part of a review of the RE curriculum in one diocese in Australia, a sample of students from across the diocese were asked to participate in unstructured, in-depth interviews in groups of five to six students. Students from five secondary schools were chosen to reflect the differences in size, location, contexts, and student bodies of the diocese, while seven primary schools were chosen using

systematic sampling.[3] Students came from years 5–12. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into student experiences of and desires for RE.

The conversations with the secondary students covered a range of topics and those of interest to this discussion were:

Does RE have relevance in your life?
How could we improve RE?
Your ideal RE Teacher

The secondary students presented mostly positive views of RE although some felt that RE was less important than other subject areas and took time away from more important learning, in later school years. However, they were able to identify the personal development lessons of RE such as "It's good to be engaged in RE, integrate our deeper thinking and feelings", as well as gaining a deeper understanding of others, "Respect other's opinions and beliefs, be inclusive, understand other religions, know that Catholicism isn't the only belief".

Secondary students recommended areas for improvement in RE. They wanted to learn about the Bible in an interesting way and raised concerns about the repetitive nature of scripture passages chosen by teachers. The students expressed a desire for teachers to integrate the things students like such as creativity, music, writing, charitable works, and "hands on" activities. Importantly for this article, students expressed a strong desire for discussions and bringing in their own thoughts, reflections, and feelings. Students wanted more opportunity for active responses to their faith and connection to their lives today.

The secondary students' ideal teacher echoed their desires for an interactive pedagogy in RE. They described a teacher who creates a relaxed classroom and encourages discussion, who is open, listens, encourages, and respects students to share their opinions without passing judgement. They wanted this teacher to be passionate, motivated, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and interested in what students think. They also wanted teachers who believed and were witnesses to the faith and/or brought in witnesses as guest presenters.

The conversations with primary students covered seven themes. The questions of interest to this discussion are:

Does RE have relevance in your life?
What are some of the positive things you have done in RE?
How could we improve RE?
Can you describe the ideal RE teacher?

Primary students also presented with mostly positive views of RE and were able to articulate its relevance for their lives. Students identified knowledge, direction, social action, understanding, meaning, values, and virtues as the positive impact of RE. Students particularly enjoyed learning about other religions and cultures. They preferred activities that involved creativity, thinking, and engagement. They expressed support for open discussions and opportunity for differing opinions. They also liked the practical application of the faith in social outreach. These students were positive about learning about topics such as the Bible, Sacraments, the Church, and prayer.

Despite their positive support for RE, the students had ideas for improvement. They desired more involvement with and discussion of the Bible. Students observed that teachers used a very restricted range of Bible stories, and their presentation was dry and serious. They wanted more opportunity for research, projects, creativity, presentations, involvement, movies, and witness from adults. Most importantly for this paper, they were keen to have more discussions and opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas.

When asked about the ideal RE teacher, they wanted them to be respectful, enthusiastic, open-minded, and knowledgeable about RE. They wanted teachers to provide interesting

activities and be interested in what students think and encourage discussion and deep thinking. They also expressed a desire to be able to make decisions about their own faith.

In short, students expect their learning experiences in RE to be as interesting, well-planned, and pedagogically sound as all their other subjects. They also expect that their teachers will be knowledgeable in the subject and engage them in deep and meaningful discussions about Religion and the meaning of life.

2.2. Study 2: Student Responses Indicating a Need for Dialogue

In other research exploring children's understanding of God, a group of 11- and 12-year-old students and their parents agreed to the students responding to questions about God on a written survey (Larkins 2021). The questions were:

1. Who is God?
2. Where and when do you find God?
3. How does knowing God make a difference to your life?

This research formed part of a Masters project and approval for this research was given by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee. These students were also part of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Research Project. Their results on the Post Critical Belief Scale[4] indicated that as a group they were high in post critical belief. However, the individual student responses to the questions about God identified some literal belief and some children with magical thinking about God and how God acts in the world. The children's responses highlighted the importance of dialogue and discussion with students, to explore their thinking and to help them to come to a deeper understanding of the transcendent. It was concerning that although, as a group, the students were high in Post-Critical Belief, if left unexplored by teachers the beliefs of individual students could lead to children abandoning belief in God when they experience difficulties, and God does not intervene in the way they expect. This also points to the importance of inviting older students to understand negative theology or not knowing: the idea that as humans we cannot truly know God or have the language to describe the transcendent but are better able to say what God is not (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020).

3. Discussion

How Teachers Can Incorporate a Dialogical Teaching and Learning Approach Within a Catechetical, Didactic Curriculum

There is some reasonable argument for an explicit curriculum in the particularity of the Catholic faith, especially given that many teachers are coming to the classroom with a limited background in the faith (Larkins et al. 2022; Franchi and Rymarz 2017) and even those with a little knowledge are fearful that they may teach the wrong thing (Madden et al. 2022). It is consequently essential for these teachers to also be given the opportunity to experience dialogue in this space. Although many have limited backgrounds, teachers are keen to develop their understandings (Sturt-Buttle 2019). Systems, school leaders, and teacher education programs can support teachers in this space through offering appropriate professional development and curricula that support this approach. The development of teachers for this approach has been addressed in detail in other books and articles (Mercieca and Rennie 2023; Madden 2020; Poncini 2024).

This article is not questioning the content of RE curricula but rather the pedagogical approach to engaging young people in the RE classroom and providing opportunities for an encounter with Christ. For some time, leaders in this area have identified the need for the pedagogy of the RE classroom to be as interesting and effective as for all other areas of the curriculum (Grajczonek 2015). We would advocate for an approach which includes theologising with students. This approach involves "faith seeking understanding".[5] A

theologising approach would allow for a systematic study of humans understanding of God, and allow for questioning and exploration of ideas. This would allow for a movement from an intuitive acceptance of belief in the transcendent to a deeper understanding. It might also involve doubt seeking understanding as young people grapple with their ideas about God, life, and their own sense of meaning and purpose.

Firstly, a change of attitude may be required in both timetabling practices in some schools as well as some teachers' attitudes to subject delivery. RE requires that teachers have the same passion, knowledge, and confidence to teach RE as to teach other subject areas. In an ideal world, they would also be people of faith. Teachers of RE with sufficient confidence in their subject are able to teach without fear. This was supported by the students' views of an ideal RE Teacher. Teachers would benefit from having the skills for dialoguing themselves to teach and implement this type of pedagogy. Planning for RE is most effective in teams with at least one expert in the area. Lessons should incorporate the range of best practice teaching and learning strategies available. Curriculum developers and system leaders can assist teachers by providing theological background to units of work and related enduring questions.[6] Students are an excellent resource for providing ideas about the ideal RE classroom. Above all, students need to be given the time and space to explore their own ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and questions. This requires teachers to be confident in their own positions and the position of the Catholic Church in areas that are important for their students. The plural nature of classrooms provides the impetus for moving from a catechetical approach to RE to a theologising approach. This gives students the opportunity to explore the religious tradition as a valuable legacy (Dillen 2007). While the curriculum guides content, teachers can be alert to the big questions that students are grappling with in their everyday lives.

More specifically, it is important to lay the ground rules for dialogue. The teacher explains how the interactions should take place. As part of the ground rules, students need to learn the vocabulary of dialogue such as questioning, speculating, proposing, negotiating, inviting elaboration, challenging respectfully, and changing their mind. It cannot be assumed that all children would come to school with this vocabulary.

These studies explore students' thoughts about God and perceptions of RE and this article proposes dialogue as a means of improving their experience and learning. The argument for greater dialogue in RE classes could be enhanced and supported by further study, exploring the suggested pedagogical approach and deepening the theoretical understanding and application of dialogic learning. This could be a good opportunity for an action research project involving students and staff as they are most affected.

4. Conclusions

RE is more than a skills- and knowledge-based subject. It is engaged in assisting students to interpret their reality and develop mental models or understandings of the world and the transcendent (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020). A dialogical approach encourages students to be more aware of their interior space and their reasons for holding particular positions in the area of faith and religious belief.

Both Jesus and Saint Paul used a style of teaching which involved storytelling, relating their message to the life of their audience, indicating how their message would make a difference, offering hope, and dialoguing.

Students are not the same as they were in the past and therefore are unlikely to respond to a purely kerygmatic approach to RE. Far from lacking interest in religious and spiritual ideas, young people are interested to explore at a deeper level. Teachers are also not the same and while lacking the immersion in religion of earlier generations they are keen to

develop their understandings. They will need much support, confidence, and courage for a dialogical approach.

While curriculum content is beyond the scope of this article, in the review of the Curriculum described above it was decided to include more units about St Paul, the Holy Spirit, and Discernment as a way of helping students and teachers to understand the beginnings of the Church and how we experience God today through the action of the Holy Spirit. The focus of the article has been on the RE classroom however more generally it is time for teachers and leaders in Catholic schools to stop thinking of their curriculum as a state-based curriculum with RE added, to a Catholic Curriculum which ensures that the requirements of the state-based curriculum are covered (D'Orsa et al. 2012). This could be facilitated by including the Catholic view in dialogue within most areas of the curriculum. This would require a formation of teachers to provide them with the background and skills to engage in the dialogue. This could also provide an opportunity for further research.

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Notes

1 National Catholic Education Commission. Up-to-date information can be found on the NCEC website, https://ncec.catholic.edu.au/, accessed 12 January 2025.

2 See (Sharkey 2024) in this issue for elaboration on this topic.

3 Systematic sampling is a type of probability sampling method in which sample members from a larger population are selected according to a random starting point and a fixed periodic interval. This interval, called the sampling interval, is calculated by dividing the population size by the desired sample size. This method of sampling is widely used in nation-wide studies of Australian children's achievements.

4 Post-Critical Belief is described as the transition from a free-critical, unreflective acceptance of Christian text and traditions (first naiveté—Ricoeur) towards a critically aware, historically attuned relationship with those texts and traditions (second naiveté).

5 A definition of theology from St Anselm of Canterbury.

6 See Catholic Education Sandhurst Religious Education site as an example: https://ceosand.catholic.edu.au/catholicidentity/source-of-life/section-1, accessed 12 January 2025.

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Article

"There's a Difference Between Staying a Catholic and Being a Catholic": Gathering Student Voice in Creating a Meaning-Full RE Curriculum for Catholic Schools

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Abstract

This article examines how student voice informed the development of *Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith*, the national Religious Education (RE) curriculum for Catholic schools in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Through student-submitted RE questions and 63 informal Zoom-based "Interschool Catholic Yarns" with over 400 senior students over several years, the National Centre for Religious Studies gathered valuable insights into student experience and expectations. These contributions influenced RE curriculum content, nuance, and priorities. Emphasising accessible engagement with young people, the two outlined approaches align with Catholic commitments to synodality and formation. This article demonstrates that engaging student voice is both possible and necessary in designing RE that is meaningful, faithful, and grounded.

Keywords: student voice; religious education; Catholic; interschool Catholic yarn; Aotearoa; New Zealand; National Centre for Religious Studies; Tō Tātou Whakapono

1. Introduction

The title of this article is a quote from a 17–18 year old young woman in a Catholic high school. She suggests that too many adults have 'stayed' Catholic without actually practicing what it means to 'be' Catholic. It is one example of insights and challenges gained from senior students in Catholic high schools in Aotearoa NZ[1], via two accessible approaches to gathering student voice. The director of the National Centre for Religious Studies (NCRS), the Catholic agency providing Religious Education curricula and materials for all Catholic schools in this country, has conducted ongoing Zoom conversations with senior secondary students in Catholic schools seeking such wisdom. These sessions are intentionally not methodical research but are rather, as billed with the students and organising staff, an "Interschool Catholic Yarn" (ICY)—a Zoom conversation between himself and students to seek informal feedback and advice about RE from their perspectives. The resulting student contributions, along with students' RE questions, have informed design and resources for the new RE curriculum for Aotearoa NZ: *Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith* (TTWOF) (NCRS 2021).

2. Context

Aotearoa NZ has 49 Catholic Secondary schools[2] and 185 Catholic Primary schools across all six dioceses, educating around 67,000 young people who represent eight percent of the total student population (New Zealand Catholic Education Office 2024). These statistics have remained relatively stable over the past 10 years, despite a national climate

of rising secularisation and declining religious involvement, aligned with most of the Western world (Wilberforce Foundation 2023; Owen 2018). Until 2021, all primary schools taught the *Primary Religious Education (RE) curriculum* (National Centre for Religious Studies 1997) and all but one[3] secondary school delivered the senior RE curriculum *Understanding Faith* (NCRS 2010), as mandated by the NZ Catholic Bishops' Conference and as designed and resourced through their agency the National Centre for Religious Studies. In mid 2016, when the current director of NCRS was appointed, both curricula were over 20 years old, apart from minor revisions, and there was a general outcry from principals and RE leaders and teachers not just for an update to the old material and context but for a completely new RE curriculum.

A unique factor of Aotearoa NZ is that all Catholic schools have an individual integration agreement with the NZ Government whereby they are required to maintain a Catholic 'special character', which includes the teaching of Religious Education. Linked with this, Catholic schools also have an enrolment system called 'preference' whereby a high percentage of the maximum roll, usually 95%, must include "those children whose parents have established a particular or general religious connection with the special character of the school" (New Zealand Catholic Education Office 2020b, p. 42). There is a national process for each diocese, managing the granting of such preference (New Zealand Catholic Education Office 2020a). This situation is set in law, with all Catholic schools being 'state-integrated' schools, meaning they are not private or independent but have a legislative agreement between the Government[4] and the proprietor of each school, usually the diocesan bishop, where schools are funded by the Ministry of Education for their day-to-day operation (including staff salaries and the maintenance of the school buildings and grounds). As a result, in theory, 95% of students in Catholic schools and their families are committed to the faith dimension of the school. The reality is much more complex in practice, with the technical criteria for preference, such as the child having received the Catholic sacrament of Baptism, often masking little or no current familial or personal faith practice such as regular Mass attendance (Owen 2018; Wanden and Birch 2007).

This particular education context is significant for Catholic RE curriculum development in Aotearoa NZ, because unlike many countries the challenge to address pluralism within Catholic schools, such as outlined by Faller (2019) and Mellor (2024), is mitigated by a legal protection that RE is expected to be Catholic. There is sensitivity towards the five or so percent of students who may hold other faiths or none, and there is awareness that many, perhaps most, Catholic students are disconnected from beliefs and practices of the Church. Aotearoa NZ Catholic schools are not without students who are unhappy with Catholic RE and having to conform to Catholic practices, as evidenced internationally (Kenyon 2010; Stapleton 2020). However, families enrol young people in a Catholic school in this country knowing Religious Education will be Catholic, as affirmed by them in their preference enrolment process and as supported in the secular law of the land regarding Catholic state-integrated schools. This is further considered reasonable in the Aotearoa NZ educational landscape because it is usual for other, non-religious, schools to be available as an alternative for enrolment.

It is within this rather simplified context that the journey towards a new national RE curriculum began in 2018. Myriad international RE curricula were read and analysed by the NCRS team, with components carefully noted and discussed in the drafting process. Many groups and individuals were consulted, working parties gathered, and multiple drafts formed and revised before *Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith* was released by the NZ Catholic Bishops' Conference in December 2021. However, those elements are not the focus here.

This article describes both the approaches and outcomes of intentionally seeking and including one critical element of curriculum development often omitted in the literature–that of student voice.

3. Approaches for Gathering and Including Student Voice

3.1. Student RE Questions

Given the long-term call for a new RE curriculum, in early 2018, NCRS committed to quickly producing two bridging documents, one each for primary schools (NCRS 2018a) and secondary schools (NCRS 2018b), to draw together concepts in current curricula and to begin a process of determining new directions for an unknown future curriculum. A critical point for considering such new directions was to ask young people what RE questions they had.

An invitational poster was made with a prompting word-map of as many RE words as the author could muster at the time, such as: Saints, Mass, Jesus, God, Heaven, Relationships, Gospel, etc., and a heading saying, "Send us your RE Questions!!" A QR code linking to a URL for a Google form, which was also present as an easily typed 'tinyurl', was included, along with the NCRS logo (See Figure 1). A short e-mail was sent to all Aotearoa NZ Catholic schools asking teachers to put the poster in prominent places and encourage students to send in their questions.

Figure 1. A screenshot of the A4 poster sent to all Catholic schools.

The form itself presented four fields, only the first two of which were compulsory: 'What year are you in?', 'What is a question you would really like to have answered in RE?', 'You can ask another question if you want', and, 'Any extra comment?' Encouraging descriptors were added below each prompt.

The response was exceedingly useful in terms of encouraging direction for the NCRS team, but also disappointing in that only 640 questions were received. The number of responses were fairly evenly spread across all levels. An unexpected personal challenge, since the survey was rightly completely anonymous, was the lack of opportunity to reply directly to these very real young people who posed such engaging questions and who clearly sought answers.

Despite a relatively low response, the questions received were a powerful insight into what an RE curriculum needs to answer for our young people. The following are a few samples:

Five- and six-year-old children asked: Why did Jesus carry a cross? Why did Jesus pray to God? Where is the Pope's house? Does God have a penis? How can God be inside our heart?

Seven and eight year olds asked: How did Mary get pregnant? Did God create the Big Bang Theory? Is God a person or a light? Why does God love everyone including the bad people? How does the Holy Spirit work in my heart? How far did Jesus walk in his life?

Nine and ten year olds asked: What does God look like? What religion was Jesus? What is the purpose of RE? Who was the person that made the Bible? Why did God make the Trinity? Why are there different types of Churches? How does God watch us all at the same time? How do we know if the Bible is real? Was all the water fresh? Did God use magic?

Eleven and twelve year olds asked: Why does God let people die painfully, babies with cancer, people with diseases? God flooded the world because he wasn't pleased with humans, so will he flood us for causing global warming? If Mary was a virgin how did she have other kids? How did churches start? Did God create himself? Is Jesus really God's son?

Thirteen and fourteen year olds asked: If God knew that his son was going to die, why did he let it happen? Do you really believe Jesus did all those miracles? Did Adam and Eve, and descendants, procreate by incest? Why do people get visions of angels? Why doesn't God help Satan become a better person? Why is the Catholic Church against gay people–they're normal people and it doesn't matter who they love or marry?

Fifteen and sixteen year olds asked: Jesus was born or not, I can't believe the story about Jesus? Why did the pope remove the concept of Limbo? Why is Jesus the main focus of the Church instead of God? How do the morals and ethics of religious people compare to the ones of non-religious people? Why does a religion have to be forced upon us when some people may not believe the same as everyone else?

Seventeen and eighteen year olds asked: How will the Church cope in a rapidly progressing world that is becoming much more liberal? Why does God allow suffering? In which ways is Christianity a good alternative to other religions? Why did Jesus go to Hell and then go to Heaven? Why do you hate gays?

All questions were collated into a nine-page document ordered under year levels, and colour coded into groups indicated by the themes perceived within the questions themselves: God-Creator, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Afterlife, Church, Liturgy/Liturgical Year; Saints, Scripture, History, Justice, Prayer, and General. These pages were printed and affixed to the NCRS office wall. As the bridging documents and subsequent new curriculum took shape, they were regularly perused in an authentic effort to account for each question being addressed somewhere within the RE curriculum.

It is important to note that the intent was never to apply a technical, clinical, research tool or method to this data. The goal was to gather questions from our young people so that the NCRS team, especially the author who oversaw the projects, could gain and retain specific voice of the young people being served–to check in with "what do the students in the classrooms today want and expect?" (Larkins and Owen 2025, p. 4). Multiple

questions became core elements of ongoing discussion, and many were shared back with principals and teachers during curriculum-drafting consultation as examples of what young people were seeking and of what NCRS was attempting to construct and provide. These questions grounded the team in some of the reality of students and fostered a warm sense of connection to their lives. The questions supported a commitment not only to the technical elements of an emerging curriculum, but a palpable connection to actual hearts and minds in Catholic school classrooms.

3.2. Interschool Catholic Yarns

In addition, within six months of taking on the leadership role in NCRS, the author sought an ongoing process which would provide regular contextual information from young people, with minimal additional workload pressures for himself or the organising teachers and participating students in schools. Conversations with other experienced researchers within the wider Catholic Institute[5] at the time supported an open, anonymous, and inclusive approach where all parties were made aware of ethical and participatory elements within the process, especially the protection of anonymity and option to withdraw at any time.

A prior casual conversation with an enthusiastic past student on the streets of Dunedin proffered the title "Interschool Catholic Yarn" (ICY). The ex-student readily grasped the intent to gather honest and grounded information from students about current and potential RE content and context in Catholic school classrooms. He simply stated, "You just want to have an interschool Catholic yarn with them." Thus, the name was established, and the informality of the process was affirmed.

The next step in planning was to determine who and how to have that yarn. Previous personal teaching experience, along with conversations with other teachers, indicated Year 12[6] students would be ideal: Most would have experienced RE in the junior years and they would also have completed one year of formal examination of RE under Religious Studies in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2025). They would bring a certain maturity, and some contextual benefit in being students who were still invested in future RE rather than final-year, Year 13, students who may be more cognisant of RE discontinuing for them at the end of the year.

Zoom, which was relatively new and innovative in 2016, especially before COVID-19 influenced the widespread embracing of such technologies, added both an effective means of connecting and a technological appeal to students at the time. The potential of the technology itself encouraged the decision to give students the opportunity to engage in a conversation with the author alongside another group of students from a different school. Also, by conversing with two groups of students at the same time, there was the opportunity to springboard off each other's comments and engage in short bursts of inter-school dialogue to tease out an idea or experience. An important additional benefit of conversing with two schools at a time was to mitigate the ethical dilemma of ensuring participant comments were not only anonymous in terms of individual contributions but also in terms of identifying their originating school.

Springboard questions were set and have been used for all ICYs with only minor development, though, in practice, the conversation would often range beyond these opening queries. The intent was for the first two questions to support students being at ease by talking about their own school and positive RE experiences, then gradually, arguably, moving into deeper personal territory:

What's great about your school?

What are the best three things about RE?

What is something you might like to change in RE?

What do you like in RE resources? (activities, types of images, texts, etc)
How else do you think the Catholic 'thing' adds to your school?
What do your non-Catholic friends think about RE?
How does RE support your personal relationship with Jesus (personal spirituality)?
Finally, is there anything you'd like to ask me or tell me. (Or ask each other?)

The time-frame was set to 30 min for each ICY. However, this often extended up to 45 min with permission of the participating young people, as per an agreed possibility with organising teachers prior to the session. ICYs were not permitted to go longer than 45 min, lest the potential wrath of other subject teachers missing their students establish a negative attitude towards the process and hinder such opportunities in subsequent years.

If, last minute, a school group did not turn up to the assigned ICY, the conversation could be held with a single school, or they would be given the option of having another time assigned. No groups took up this latter option. The missing group would be given the opportunity to connect in another ICY, paired with a different school if possible, or as an individual group if no additional schools were available.

It was decided that students would feel more free to contribute if ICYs were not digitally recorded, but notes would be taken throughout the conversation with the intention of capturing key phrases as close to verbatim as possible. Notes do not include specific references to students or schools. At the same time, with the students knowing what had been said during an ICY, typed notes would later, usually the same day, be e-mailed to them giving an opportunity to clarify or change points they may have made.[7] Students were informed at the start of each ICY that the anonymised notes would be shared with them, and with the organising teacher/s at their school, as well as being used by NCRS. An invitation to withdraw from the ICY if they wished was included in the introduction, though none chose to do so. (N.B. With single-school ICYs, students gave verbal permission that their school, but not them personally, would be recognisable in the local sharing of notes).

With these processes in place, in 2016, all NZ Catholic secondary schools were invited by e-mail, with explanatory information, to participate in an Interschool Catholic Yarn. Those schools who chose to reply were accepted, and schools were set up in pairs, and e-mailed a date, time, and meeting link. ICY volunteer participants were small groups of 16–18 year olds, either self-selected, or selected by their teacher. Often teachers, wisely, handed over the full organisation to the students themselves. Comments within group conversations indicate that participating students range from self-proclaimed atheists to committed practicing Catholics. Conversations were held, and anonymous comments have been noted, shared and utilised by NCRS. This approach has been replicated many times.

At time of writing, seven rounds of ICYs have taken place—annually from 2016 to 2019, then in 2021, 2023, and 2025. There have been 63 Interschool Catholic Yarns in total, involving 117 groups of students from Catholic secondary schools. (Including ICYs with a single school due to the other forgetting to turn up or other extenuating circumstances.) Group sizes have ranged from 2 to 14 students per school at a time. In total, 428 students have taken part, with just under two thirds being girls. In terms of school representation, out of 48 Catholic schools teaching year 12, 11 out of 17 boys' schools have participated, along with 11 of 14 girls' schools and 16 of 17 co-ed schools. Regarding recurring decisions to engage with an ICY, 10 schools have never participated, 5 have participated once, 14 twice, 12 three times, 2 four times, 4 five times, and none have participated in more than five. All of which has resulted in over 26 thousand words of student comments.

While the following examples reinforce the worth of such an approach in curriculum design, it is important to also note that at the end of ICYs, students have consistently indicated their gratitude at having their voice sought, and of having been listened to. Teachers e-mailing back, after the typed-up notes have been received, also comment on

how much the students enjoyed the experience, and thank NCRS for the opportunity of letting their students speak and be heard. From the beginning steps it was recognised that there was benefit in this experience. There is a sense of overt synergy with the ICY process and the current synodal Catholic call to listen to one another (Francis 2021). Our young people wish to be heard.

At the same time, as curriculum designers, the gift of what they actually say is invaluable! There is little doubt that the "Church can better respond to contemporary challenges and fulfil its mission of evangelization if all members are participating in dialogue" (Larkins and Owen 2025, p. 1). This is particularly so with regard to developing quality meaningful Religious Education.

4. Examples and Utilisation of ICY Student Voice

It is important, again, to recognise that the impetus behind these conversations has always been to 'check-in' and keep 'grounded' with our young people rather than to engage with in-depth analysis. As with the collection of students' questions, the goal of ICYs is to hear the voice of the young people whom RE is intended to serve. Comments have significant synergy with Australian findings (Larkins and Owen 2025), and with international approaches to RE content and direction (Buchanan and Gellel 2019; Gleeson and Goldburg 2020). However, perhaps more importantly for NCRS, they inform the *nuance* of the new RE curriculum for Aotearoa NZ. It is in this context of trying to learn not just where our young people are at, and what they are needing, but what they are observing and offering as insights, that the power of Interschool Catholic Yarns comes to the fore. For the author, it is not so much the collective themes or commonality of understandings that give the greatest value, so much as the specificity of single comments that can leap out of the familiar themes to capture a nuance which introduces a whole new perspective for curriculum writing.

Myriad comments, such as capacity of teachers, desire for interactive discussion, and inclusion of learning about other faiths, align with the student voice research of Larkins and Owen (2025) and have merit as such. However, a focus for the author was capturing phrases and nuances which could be used both as a point of reflection and direction for developers of curriculum, and also as a reinforcement for particular approaches when shared with bishops, school principals, and RE leaders and teachers.

The PowerPoint slide captured in Figure 2 was used in dozens of workshops around Aotearoa NZ in 2021 as TTWOF was coming together as a curriculum. (The background photograph was of a group of Year 12 students on a trust walk during a Catholic school retreat.) It presents quotes from ICY conversations as a solid set of examples, which as the following discussion explains, reflect the impact of student voice in the curriculum development. It also served to help connect Catholic school principals and other RE leaders to the intent, purpose, and challenge of RE.

> "With hauora[8], often the spiritual is kicked to the wayside–people are starting to realise its important" (18 June 2021).
>
> "RE is about a journey–you're constantly building, not just learning stuff" (14 September 2016).

The NCRS team had been reflecting on background ideas of spirituality, pilgrimage, and journey as young people moved through RE in Catholic schools. Hauora is a Māori concept of health and wellbeing, encompassing physical, mental, social, and spiritual needs. These comments re-emphasised the concept of young people being on a spiritual journey as central not just peripheral to their RE learning: The term 'hīkoi wairua spiritual

journey' is therefore present throughout TTWOF, as a key concept, with one particular section explaining the concept in depth (NCRS 2021, pp. 24–27).

> "Best thing you can do to improve RE is make sure the teacher knows what they are teaching" (25 June 2021).

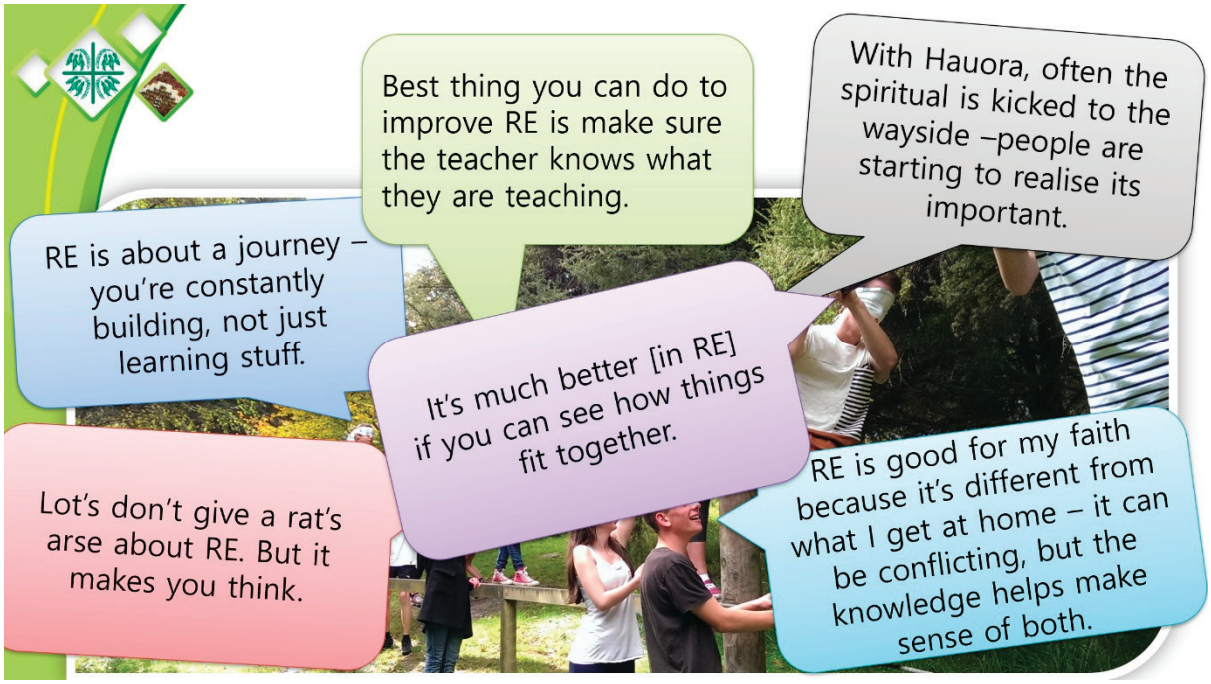

Figure 2. A screenshot of a PowerPoint slide used in consultation with principals and other RE leaders.

There had been some initial thinking that theological knowledge would be provided separately from curriculum resources. In conjunction with deeper conversations with teachers, NCRS grasped this ICY comment, and as an important step in the challenge of equipping teachers to provide quality RE, committed to creating detailed 'Background Notes' to accompany all resources created for schools.[9]

> "Lots don't give a rat's arse about RE. But it makes you think" (16 June 2021).

The explicit truth of this comment, in the author's experience, is difficult to ignore, and is ignored at an RE curriculum development team's peril. The reality is that many may not engage in the spiritual and faith dimensions of RE learning. However, hope lies in resources which engage students and at least make them think. *Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith* states, "Participation in RE does not require or even expect a personal faith commitment from learners, however, it is expected that young people will engage with the knowledge and learning experiences: to enter into the dialogue" (NCRS 2021, pp. 8–9). The challenge is accepted by the NCRS team in remembering those who do not care about RE by creating engaging resources with them in mind. NCRS's part in 'entering into the dialogue' is also represented in seeking and listening to the ICY comment itself (and others like it).

> "It's much better [in RE] if you can see how things fit together" (11 June 2019).

While not a novel pedagogical concept, the clarity of this phrase supported a commitment to coherence and cohesion within design and resources. These two terms have become foundational for the director of NCRS, originating in Fullan's (2015) new pedagogies for deeper learning, but contextualised in this ICY comment. The integrated curriculum design (NCRS 2021, p. 34) and approach to resource development supports overt weaving of concepts so teachers and students may see how RE learning 'fits together'.

> "RE is good for my faith because it's different from what I get at home–it can be conflicting, but the knowledge helps make sense of both" (28 June 2021).

With increasing immigration and changing cultural demographics in Aotearoa NZ impacting the religious landscape of this country (Wilberforce Foundation 2018, 2023), there was a sense in the NCRS team that young people from 'faith-filled' families would already know much of the content being planned for a broad spectrum of faith engagement or a lack thereof. This ICY statement recalibrated NCRS to an awareness that the complexity was deeper than faith connections. The implied reality is that many faithful parents of children in Catholic schools do not have a depth of RE knowledge. Young people are seeking more knowledge. The reciprocal awareness is that some knowledge can be challenging for parents, and children need to be supported in recognising faith and knowledge as supportive on their faith hīkoi wairua, along with the faith journey of their wider family. NCRS is careful to be sensitive of this reality in our resources.

Finally, two more recent examples are provided to reflect the ongoing support that ICY conversations have for NCRS's ongoing RE curriculum work:

> "It's [RE] helped me. I grew up in a Catholic family and RE has helped me so much. Without RE I only have family opinions and Mass to go off. It's opened my eyes. They're not teaching us in parishes or in families" (28 June 2023).

There is a wealth of planning and resources for RE in Catholic schools, and a commitment to ongoing development in this area. With so much content already available, this comment prompts NCRS to reach out to diocesan offices and investigate ways in which materials might be shared outside of schools, in parishes, and even developed for adults. The director of NCRS is just beginning to have conversations with diocesan representatives in this regard.

> "You can't slap [Catholic] identity on to someone without informing them. Understanding leads to faith choices" (20 May 2025).

This surprising statement aligns closely with current research into the relationship between parishes and parish schools in Aotearoa NZ, in which identity is named as a central element (MacLeod 2025). The observation that RE plays a role in forming Catholic identity, rather than it being 'slapped' onto individuals from presupposed faith assumptions, is a critical area of reflection not just for future Catholic education but for future identities of the Church itself.

5. Conclusions

There is a phrase often used by those living with disabilities, and by many commonly marginalised groups, when engaging with governmental or other support agencies: Nothing about us, without us. For similar reasons of inclusion, respect, and potential effectiveness, the same resonates with young people in Aotearoa NZ Catholic secondary school RE. This article outlines two straightforward approaches which have served, and continue to serve, NCRS in the development of a new RE curriculum and ongoing associated resources.

If it were not for student voice, the director of NCRS could easily be leading RE curriculum projects with the sole focus of providing secular-quality RE direction and resources as expected by the bishops and other Catholic education managers. Instead, he finds himself also checking whether the materials are helping young people and their teachers to 'be Catholic' or just 'stay Catholic'. That is the power of student voice.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The approaches described in the article were conducted with clear ethical intent, appropriate oversight, and respect for the dignity and autonomy of all participants. While not framed as formal research requiring IRB approval, every effort was made to ensure that ethical standards—consistent with best practice in educational consultation—were upheld. I trust this contextualisation clarifies the rationale for not seeking formal ethics review at the time and affirms the integrity with which these authentic approaches, to receive the 'voice' of the students themselves, were conducted.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data for this study are not stored in a publicly accessible repository but are available on request from correspondence author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Aotearoa NZ is a common term for New Zealand as it is inclusive of indigenous Māori.
2 Note, St Ignatius of Loyola College opened in Auckland in 2024 and does not have senior students yet.
3 St Peter's College, Auckland, was granted interim exemption by +Patrick Dunn in 2007.
4 Private Schools Conditional Integration Act (1977), continued in the Education and Training Act (2020).
5 The Catholic Institute (TCI) was the parent agency of NCRS when ICYs began, this later became Te Kupenga—Catholic Leadership Institute in 2020.
6 Year 12 (16–17 year olds) in Aotearoa NZ secondary schools is the penultimate year of secondary education, with year 13 being the final year.
7 Over 63 ICYs very few corrections have been received from students, but in 2019 one group wrote an addendum of three paragraphs to extend a concept, and after a separate ICY one student wrote a 526 word follow-up e-mail with additional contributions.
8 A te reo Māori term, commonly used in Aotearoa NZ education, meaning health and well-being.
9 Resources are provided for teachers with permissions on the NCRS TTWOF website: www.ourfaith.nz.

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Article

Māori Before English: Religious Education in Aotearoa NZ Ko tōku reo tōku ohooho, ko tōku reo tōku māpihi maurea—*My Language Is My Awakening, My Language Is the Window to My Soul*

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Abstract

In 2021, the National Centre for Religious Studies in New Zealand published the new religious education curriculum for Catholic schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. While in many ways, very like other religious education curricula, from its naming in Māori before English, Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith shines a light on the role of culture and language in the transmission and expression of faith. This paper is written in two parts. Part 1 of this paper provides an examination of the key curriculum documents and website to find that Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith is unique in three ways. First, it enjoys a level of security in the dominant presence of Catholics in the Catholic school, guaranteed by the Integration Act of 1975. Second, it offers flexibility in approach, necessary for a curriculum with national status, and finally, it demonstrates an extraordinary commitment to the inclusion of Māori culture and language. Part 2 of this paper takes up the inclusion of Māori culture and language to offer a response to the call that Māori need to be allowed to develop a theology from within their own culture and language. It proposes that the introduction of a new hermeneutical lens in the study of scripture, one that would replicate the practice of the Bible authors who drew freely on their own experience and language to speak of God, could provide a simple but effective way of developing such a theology. It is in Part 2 that the significance of the subtitle of this paper will become apparent.

Keywords: Catholic schools; Religious Education; scripture; Hermeneutics; Bi-lingual; bicultural; colonisation; biblical metaphors; theology from within

1. Part 1: Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith

1.1. Introduction

I must have been in my teens in the 1960s when somebody, I presume my parents, gave me a book titled Te rongopai ma te ao hou *Good News for Modern Man*. The red, black, and white cover, embellished with koru symbols, gave away its origins, which the small print at the bottom of the cover confirmed: Māori Bible Centenary Edition. I do not remember being at all surprised at receiving this gift. Growing up in the heart of the Waikato, 100 km south of Auckland, Māori were all around me: my friends, my teachers, my Church mates, and my neighbours. What would be more natural than having a copy of the Gospels in

their own language? As an adult, I now realise how profoundly naïve my acceptance was, that the link between what we say and what we believe is much more complex than I could ever have imagined.

This paper begins with a description of the new religious education curriculum for Catholic schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith. This description is informed by the core document, the website which supports it, and conversations with staff of the National Council for Religious Studies, Colin MacLeod (Director), and Dr Laurel Lanner. It culminates in a discussion of three features that mark it as unique. Immediately apparent is the extensive use of Te Reo *Māori language*, which runs through the document from the Mihi *Welcome* and Karakia *Blessing* to the Karakia Whakamutunga *Closing Prayer*. To highlight this feature of the document and the curriculum that supports it, this paper will follow its practice of using Te Reo Māori before its English translation in italics, for example, Te Reo Māori *Māori language*.

1.2. Context

1.2.1. Beginnings

Unlike Australia, the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa NZ) was not as a penal colony. Catholics who found their way to 'the land of the long white cloud' did so because they wanted to, bringing their religious traditions with them. Thomas and Mary Poynton are remembered as the first permanent Catholic settlers in Aotearoa NZ: the first Mass was celebrated in the Poynton's house on 13 January 1838 (New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference n.d.). Two years later, the first Catholic school in New Zealand opened in Kororareka *Russell*, dedicated to St Peter (New Zealand Catholic Education Office 2020).

On 6th February 1840, the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi *the Treaty of Waitangi* with Māori, at which Catholic Bishop Pompallier was present, established a binding agreement between Māori and the British Crown. Although still deeply unsatisfying to many New Zealanders, Pākehā *people with European ancestry* and Māori alike, Te Tiriti o Waitangi *the Treaty of Waitangi* did acknowledge the Māori people as custodians of the land, with their own culture, heritage, and beliefs. The land was never 'Terra Nullius'. Controversy over land was not avoided, however. Two versions of the treaty were signed, one in Māori, one in English. 'Most Māori signed the Māori version—which, for example, nuanced a sense of them retaining much more control than the translated terms 'sovereignty' and 'governorship' indicate in the English. The bottom line being, Te Tiriti o Waitangi is considered a separate document from *The Treaty of Waitangi*, especially by Māori' (MacLeod C. personal communication, 27 May 2025). Disputes over land erupted into wars between British and colonial troops and local Māori between 1845 and 1872. In response, the government established the New Zealand Settlements Act, allowing the Crown to confiscate the land of any tribe 'engaged in rebellion' against the government (New Zealand Government n.d.). Some land confiscated under the act still remains in the hands of the government today.

1.2.2. Catholic Education

The treaty brought a flood of settlers to the country, so that by 1842, Rome had made Aotearoa NZ an independent vicariate (New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference n.d.). In 1877, the Education Act introduced free, secular, and compulsory primary education. However, committed to Catholic education, the Church established its own schools, staffed primarily by immigrants and those from religious orders, mostly from Ireland. While the battle to build, staff, and fund these schools gave the Catholic community a focus for its energy, donations by the faithful and the unpaid labour of hundreds of devoted men and women were not enough to sustain Catholic education. In 1975, Catholic schools were

included under the wing of the government in the Private Schools Conditional Integration Act (New Zealand Government Parliamentary Office n.d.), a victory still hailed today (MacLeod C. personal communication, 27 May 2025).

The Integration Act allows schools that claim a special religious or philosophical character to enter a partnership with the government (New Zealand Catholic Education Office 2020). Under the Act, schools are governed by their Board of Trustees, onto which the Proprietor of the school, usually the Bishop, a religious institute, or Trust Board, has the right to appoint up to four members. Each school has its own Integration Agreement, which, among other things, stipulates the positions 'tagged' for Catholics, normally, 60% of the staff in a Primary school and 40% in a secondary school, excluding the Principal and the Religious Education coordinator. Also stipulated is the number of non-Catholics that the school can enrol, generally 5% of the total school population, although some exceptions are evident (Catholic Diocese of Auckland n.d.). This operational structure means that while the day-to-day running of the school, including the payment of staff salaries and the maintenance of the school's integrated buildings and grounds, is funded by the government through the Ministry of Education, the school is able to preserve and govern its Catholic character (New Zealand Catholic Education Office 2025). Catholic schools in Aotearoa NZ are still largely served by, and serving of, Catholics.

While for the most part, Pākehā *white people* and Māori live harmoniously alongside one another, the scars of colonisation and its view that the dominant, preferred culture was white and Christian remain. Indeed, the role of the Catholic Church in assimilation means that the intention of the Church, even within its schools, remains an area of careful watching for some. It is in this context that Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith comes.

1.3. Curriculum Overview

1.3.1. The Name: Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith

In Jewish tradition, to name something is to call it into being, to announce and proclaim its existence. We see this pattern in Genesis 2, when the Yahwist describes YHWH bringing the newly created animals to the human for them to name. In reverse, we also see it in the Jewish avoidance, and, indeed, refusal, to speak God's name out loud, lest it suggest that God did not and does not exist above all. The naming of this curriculum, Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith, in Māori before English, 'declares its intention to honour bi-cultural Aotearoa NZ' (MacLeod C. personal communication, 27 May 2025). The main document, of just over 100 pages, contains all of what you would expect in a foundational document for a Catholic religious education curriculum: the purpose of religious education, approaches used in the past, the relationship of this curriculum to the wider Aotearoa NZ curriculum, the current context of religious education, and the nature of the Catholic school as a bicultural community. Immediately apparent is the extensive use of Te Reo *Māori language*, which runs through the document from the Mihi *Welcome* and Karakia *Blessing* to the Karakia Whakamutunga *Closing Prayer*. The core document is supported by a website, www.ourfaith.nz (accessed on 19 June 2025).

This overview limits its consideration to the elements that directly inform classroom practice: the stated purpose of religious education, the pedagogy or method to be employed, and the structural elements that provide the framework for the curriculum, including assessment. It then explores the teaching material provided for the first broad theme, Te Atua, *God*.

1.3.2. Purpose of Religious Education

In their forward, the Bishops state that the curriculum provides 'a framework for the purpose, content and journey of Religious Education in all Catholic schools' (National

Centre for Religious Studies, hereafter, NCRS 2024, p. 8). Te Pūtake *The Purpose of Religious Education* begins by affirming the role of the Catholic school 'in the mission of the Church to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout the world' (NCRS 2024, p. 8). The formal teaching of religious education is called to have a specific role within this task of proclamation, that is, to provide 'a foundation of knowledge which works alongside the whole school's Catholic Special Character' (NCRS 2024, p. 8). Together, these complementary elements of proclamation and education help tamariki *children* form 'their understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and a member of the Catholic Church' (NCRS 2024, p. 8). While a personal faith commitment is neither required nor expected, the title of the document is a deliberate nod to its catechetical intention: that 'our faith, might become their faith too.' (MacLeod C. personal communication, 27 May 2025).

1.3.3. Method or Pedagogy Employed

The document avoids prescribing any particular pedagogy or method. Rather, it lays out a set of pedagogical principles, which ground and inform teaching (NCRS 2024).

- God, the Church, and the environment are in a relationship. 'It is as community that we engage in the learning process, and this principle underlies all pedagogical decisions' (NCRS 2024, p. 16).
- Both teacher and learner invest in the learning process, each with their own responsibilities. For teachers, it begins with knowing their learners who have agency in the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge.
- There is a transformative dimension to RE as a cycle of reflection, action, and reflection as children integrate 'a Catholic worldview into their understandings' (NCRS 2024, p. 16).
- 'In a complex world and in challenging times, it is important to encourage anticipation, joy and hope through learning experiences' (NCRS 2024, p. 16).

In preferring the use of principles rather than a singular pedagogy or method, the curriculum allows for a range of approaches, accepting the risks involved in the lack of a formulaic method. This openness to pedagogical diversity is both pragmatic and philosophical. As a national curriculum, the document needs to be useful in and for all six Catholic Diocese that cover the North and South Islands. Schools, wherever they are situated, are to choose from the 'vast array of guidance and models on which to base their pedagogical choices', mindful, however, that the particular body of knowledge necessary for sharing the Gospel 'is not lost in the wake of more flexible pedagogies which require little specific knowledge or understanding to be gained (NCRS 2024, p. 15).' However religious education is taught, learning is to be 'grounded, engaging and informative. When the knowledge is strong it will support and strengthen faith that is gifted from God. This is the place of RE in our Catholic schools' (NCRS 2024, p. 17).

1.3.4. Structural Elements

The structure of the curriculum is most easily expressed with reference to the diagram found in the document, Figure 1 (NCRS 2024, p. 34).

Figure 1. The structural framework (NCRS 2024, p. 34).

Te Rama Whakapono Light of Faith Themes

Four Te Rama Whakapono *Light of Faith* themes provide a vertical structure 'for broad categories of the knowledge and learning', drawn from Theology, Scripture, History, and Pastoral Application (NCRS 2024, p. 33). The four themes, Te Atua *God*, Te Rongopai *Good News*, A Tatou Whakapapa *Our Story*, and Kia Noho Hahi *Being Church* 'represent well established contexts for teaching Religious Education. . . morphed and reinterpreted in the RE curriculum to resonate with the lives of children' (NCRS 2024, p. 35).

Te Rama Aroha Light of Love Themes

Threading through these four themes are five Te Rama Aroha *Light of Love* cross-themes. Different from the Te Rama Whakapono *Light of Faith* themes, these concept themes, namely, Mana Tapu *Grace*, Aroha pūmau *Holiness*, Tika *Justice*, Whakaaronui *Wisdom*, and Inoi *Prayer*, weave their way through the content at each phase. Like a lens through which content is explored, the Te Rama Aroha *Light of Love* themes travel with tamariki *children* as they move through each phase of schooling (years 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6, 7 and 8, 9 and 10, and 11, 12, and 13) so that they 'develop a deep understanding of their interconnectedness, complexity and significance. . .[forming a] recognisable and distinctive guiding light to support the young person's hīkoi wairua *spiritual journey* at school, at home and throughout their lives' (NCRS 2024, p. 37).

The language of light in describing these two themes is deliberate: 'it captures the sense that religious education is vibrant because it is illuminated by Christ. . .. [drawing] to mind rich experiences of joy, security and wonder. RE learning, reflection and experiences should enlighten us; this light is sourced in God, God's Word and God's Church and may

be seen in our own lives as gift to one another and self—we are invited to shine this light into the world' (NCRS 2024, p. 32).

Ngā Kaupapa Content Areas and Ngā Whāinga Paetae Achievement Objectives

Each of these themes and cross-themes is then worked into more specific Ngā Kaupapa *content areas*, which find expression as Ngā Whāinga Paetae *achievement objectives* for all phases of learning. Again, the flexibility of the curriculum is evident. 'Early feedback from teachers and principals was that they needed the themes and cross-themes at each level to be contextualised into 'topics'. We didn't want to be that prescriptive, but we did respond by providing richer contextualisation in 'Content Areas'. The phrase I used when going around groups across the country was that we would "create the learning contexts and knowledge within a sort of waratah fence. You will need to cover all the AOs, but you'll be able to move the waratah posts to suit your children. So, we want you to be creative within the flexible boundaries, but you will need to be within the AO area not in another paddock or heading down the motorway"' (MacLeod C. personal communication, 10 May 2025).

Notable among the Ngā Whāinga Paetae *achievement objectives* is a single outcome for each phase group intended to ensure cohesion between the formal teaching of religious education and the wider life of the school. Each 'bridging outcome' integrates learning about the phase touchstone concept (below) with its application in practice. They thus reflect the living of an understanding. Examples include students developing 'connections with parish and diocese to increase [their] sense of being part of the Catholic Church' (NCRS 2024, p. 77), 'demonstrating the fruits of the spirit in [their] everyday interactions in [their] classroom and in [their] school (NCRS 2024, p. 74) and that [a] Catholic worldview supports us to build a culture of aroha, respect and service, based on the teachings of Jesus' (NCRS 2024, p. 80).

The production of an objective that brings learning and its demonstration within school and Church reinforces the catechetical nature of the programme and its unique context as one for 'mostly Catholics'. It emphasises the desire for a close association between formal teaching and the wider life of the Catholic school.

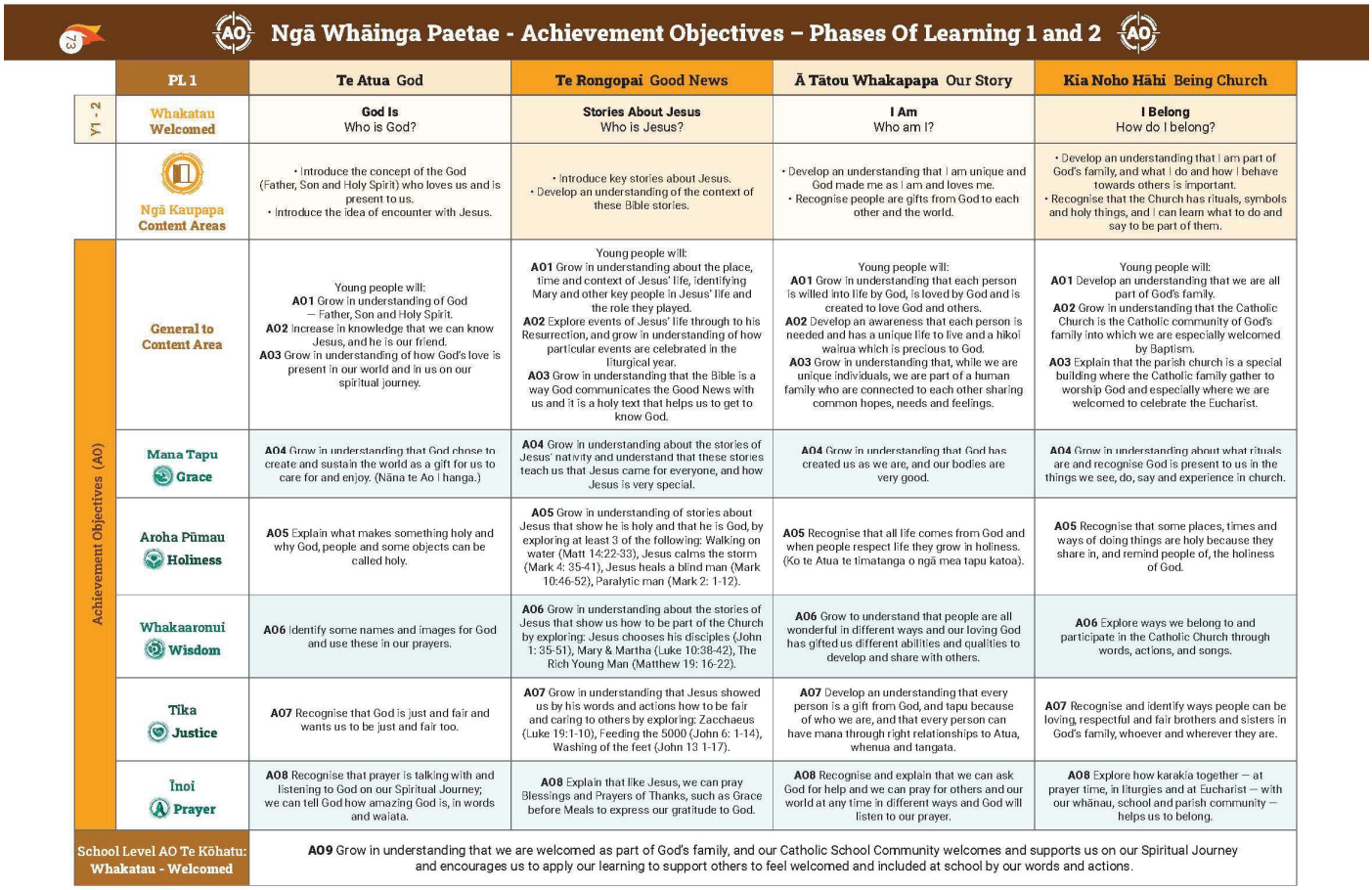
Assessment of the Te Whāinga Paetae *achievement objectives* is expected; however, the commitment to local practices is again evident. 'Teachers have skills and knowledge about assessment in the learning process which they apply across the whole curriculum including Religious Education (RE)' (NCRS 2024, p. 28). Given the 'significant body of religious knowledge which is offered to children', assessment in religious education is particularly important; it should be used to inform both teaching and learning (NCRS 2024, p. 28).

Ngā Kōhatu Touchstone

Finally, each phase group has a Ngā Kōhatu *touchstone*. Ngā Kōhatu *touchstones* are neither directly linked to the content areas nor are they alternative achievement objectives. Rather, they 'sit alongside' these other elements, providing a 'light touch of distinction between year levels' (MacLeod C. personal communication, 27 May 2025). Their wording suggests a natural developmental and strongly experiential tone, which develops across the school: I am welcome/I have welcomed; I am loved/I have loved; I am inspired/I have inspired; I am called/I have called; I am connected/I have connected; I am trusted/I have trusted; I am challenged/I have challenged; I am sent/I have sent.

At a Glance

Figure 2 contains all this information brought together at a glance, namely, the phase Ngā Kōhatu *touchstone*, the Ngā Kaupapa *content area*, and the Ngā Whāinga Paetae *achievement objectives*, for the four Te Rama Whakapono *Light of Faith* themes and the five Te Rama Aroha *Light of Love* cross-themes.



Ngā Whāinga Paetae - Achievement Objectives – Phases Of Learning 1 and 2

	PL 1	Te Atua God	Te Rongopai Good News	Ā Tātou Whakapapa Our Story	Kia Noho Hāhi Being Church
Y1 - 2	Whakatau Welcomed	**God Is** Who is God?	**Stories About Jesus** Who is Jesus?	**I Am** Who am I?	**I Belong** How do I belong?
	Ngā Kaupapa Content Areas	• Introduce the concept of the God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who loves us and is present to us. • Introduce the idea of encounter with Jesus.	• Introduce key stories about Jesus. • Develop an understanding of the context of these Bible stories.	• Develop an understanding that I am unique and God made me as I am and loves me. • Recognise people are gifts from God to each other and the world.	• Develop an understanding that I am part of God's family, and what I do and how I behave towards others is important. • Recognise that the Church has rituals, symbols and holy things, and I can learn what to do and say to be part of them.
Achievement Objectives (AO)	General to Content Area	Young people will: **AO1** Grow in understanding of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **AO2** Increase in knowledge that we can know Jesus, and he is our friend. **AO3** Grow in understanding of how God's love is present in our world and in us on our spiritual journey.	Young people will: **AO1** Grow in understanding about the place, time and context of Jesus' life, identifying Mary and other key people in Jesus' life and the role they played. **AO2** Explore events of Jesus' life through to his Resurrection, and grow in understanding of how particular events are celebrated in the liturgical year. **AO3** Grow in understanding that the Bible is a way God communicates the Good News with us and it is a holy text that helps us to get to know God.	Young people will: **AO1** Grow in understanding that each person is willed into life by God, is loved by God and is created to love God and others. **AO2** Develop an awareness that each person is needed and has a unique life to live and a hīkoi wairua which is precious to God. **AO3** Grow in understanding that, while we are unique individuals, we are part of a human family who are connected to each other sharing common hopes, needs and feelings.	Young people will: **AO1** Develop an understanding that we are all part of God's family. **AO2** Grow in understanding that the Catholic Church is the Catholic community of God's family into which we are especially welcomed by Baptism. **AO3** Explain that the parish church is a special building where the Catholic family gather to worship God and especially where we are welcomed to celebrate the Eucharist.
	Mana Tapu Grace	**AO4** Grow in understanding that God chose to create and sustain the world as a gift for us to care for and enjoy. (Nāna te Ao I hanga.)	**AO4** Grow in understanding about the stories of Jesus' nativity and understand that these stories teach us that Jesus came for everyone, and how Jesus is very special.	**AO4** Grow in understanding that God has created us as we are, and our bodies are very good.	**AO4** Grow in understanding about what rituals are and recognise God is present to us in the things we see, do, say and experience in church.
	Aroha Pūmau Holiness	**AO5** Explain what makes something holy and why God, people and some objects can be called holy.	**AO5** Grow in understanding of stories about Jesus that show he is holy and that he is God, by exploring at least 3 of the following: Walking on water (Matt 14:22-33), Jesus calms the storm (Mark 4: 35-41), Jesus heals a blind man (Mark 10:46-52), Paralytic man (Mark 2: 1-12).	**AO5** Recognise that all life comes from God and when people respect life they grow in holiness. (Ko te Atua te timatanga o ngā mea tapu katoa).	**AO5** Recognise that some places, times and ways of doing things are holy because they share in, and remind people of, the holiness of God.
	Whakaaronui Wisdom	**AO6** Identify some names and images for God and use these in our prayers.	**AO6** Grow in understanding about the stories of Jesus that show us how to be part of the Church by exploring: Jesus chooses his disciples (John 1: 35-51), Mary & Martha (Luke 10:38-42), The Rich Young Man (Matthew 19: 16-22).	**AO6** Grow to understand that people are all wonderful in different ways and our loving God has gifted us different abilities and qualities to develop and share with others.	**AO6** Explore ways we belong to and participate in the Catholic Church through words, actions, and songs.
	Tika Justice	**AO7** Recognise that God is just and fair and wants us to be just and fair too.	**AO7** Grow in understanding that Jesus showed us by his words and actions how to be fair and caring to others by exploring: Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), Feeding the 5000 (John 6: 1-14), Washing of the feet (John 13 1-17).	**AO7** Develop an understanding that every person is a gift from God, and tapu because of who we are, and that every person can have mana through right relationships to Atua, whenua and tangata.	**AO7** Recognise and identify ways people can be loving, respectful and fair brothers and sisters in God's family, whoever and wherever they are.
	Īnoi Prayer	**AO8** Recognise that prayer is talking with and listening to God on our Spiritual Journey; we can tell God how amazing God is, in words and waiata.	**AO8** Explain that like Jesus, we can pray Blessings and Prayers of Thanks, such as Grace before Meals to express our gratitude to God.	**AO8** Recognise and explain that we can ask God for help and we can pray for others and our world at any time in different ways and God will listen to our prayer.	**AO8** Explore how karakia together – at prayer time, in liturgies and at Eucharist – with our whānau, school and parish community – helps us to belong.
School Level AO Te Kōhatu: Whakatau - Welcomed		**AO9** Grow in understanding that we are welcomed as part of God's family, and our Catholic School Community welcomes and supports us on our Spiritual Journey and encourages us to apply our learning to support others to feel welcomed and included at school by our words and actions.			

Figure 2. Structure and elements for Phase 1 Te Rama Whakapono, Te Atua *God*. (NCRS 2024, p. 73).

The broad design of Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith is activated by teaching resources on the website www.ourfaith.nz (accessed on 19 June 2025). We now turn to this site to review the theme Te Atua, *God*.

1.3.5. The Curriculum at Work: Te Atua God

The Te Atua *God* tile opens to the overview, aim, and key content of this theme, taken from the main document. Te Atua *God*, 'focuses on the nature of God as revealed in the scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. It addresses such questions as who, where, what is God and what does God do? It considers each person of the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit. It addresses God's relationship with us—individually and collectively, and our relationship with God' (NCRS 2024, p. 35). The aim of this theme is for tamariki *children* to 'develop an understanding of what the Church teaches about God in terms of the nature and persons of the Trinity, and God's relationship with humanity and all of creation' (NCRS 2024, p. 41). The key content of the theme is limited to the three persons of the Trinity, again emphasising the importance of the trinitarian nature of God for the document. This is reiterated, visually, in a triangular diagram (NCRS 2024, p. 42).

The Year 1–2 phase tile opens to the touchstone focus of the phase and to the four Te Rama Whakapono *Light of Faith* themes.

Each Te Rama Whakapono *Light of Faith* theme opens to three links.

The first link repeats the Ngā Whāinga Paetae *achievement objectives* for this theme, the second opens to a Whanau *family* page, and the third opens to the Learning Packs.

The Whānau Family Page

The whānau *family* page is styled as a brochure or handout with colour and graphics. It outlines the key content for the Te Atua *God* theme in more formal language and then breaks this into a series of 'we are learning that. . .' statements. It then moves to make suggestions about how children's learning could be supported at home through discussion, activity, and prayer.

The Learning Packs

It is in the Learning Packs that the vision of Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith finds the classroom. It is also at this level that the vision of flexibility, expressed in the imagery of a 'waratah fence' is made obvious, even a little confusing. What is offered is not a set of fixed or finalised units. Rather, ongoing conversations with teachers, as well as more formal surveys, both direct and inform the material that is provided (MacLeod C. personal communication, 10 April 2025). 'It was envisaged that the same resources would be provided for all phases but the difference in needs between the 2 sectors [primary and secondary] has meant an adjustment in expectations' (Lanner L. personal communication, 16 May 2025). In spite of this, there is a sense of commonality between the two sectors in the provision of background notes, suggestions for teachers, and a folder of resources. There is also a clear recognition that this section is, and always will be, a work in progress, as folder after folder reveals new material, more ideas, and further suggestions. 'Being digital, our resources are able grow and be built upon as NCRS completes different stages and comes back to each level to revise it, taking into consideration any feedback and requests we get from our REAs [Religious Education Advisers] and teachers. This is a longterm, on-going project for our team' (NCRS 2024, Teacher information page).

- Background Notes.

The Background Notes for Phase 1-2 Te Atua *God*, Learning Pack 1, God: Father Son and Holy Spirit, begin by breaking each of the Ngā Whāinga Paetae *achievement objectives* into individual Learning Intentions, framed as 'we are learning. . .' statements. These are not the same statements as provided on the whānau *family* page, although the content is clearly similar. The document then becomes what it promises, providing information and explanatory notes on the content: God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Holiness, Names, and images for God from the Old and New Testament, the Glory Be, for example. Notes are not explicitly referenced to either the learning intentions or the achievement objectives, but they draw on the content they name.

- Suggestions for Teachers.

The most substantive document in the Learning Pack for this theme and phase is the Suggested Learning Sequence, which provides a sequence of lessons to describe how the achievement objectives and learning intentions might be achieved. In other curricula, this might be described more prescriptively as a unit of work. Directional verbs, such as unpack, set up, choose, use, explore, and print, as well as the provision of power-points, videos, posters, songs, activities, and prayers, make very concrete suggestions for teachers. In keeping with the decision to not advocate for one type or style of assessment, opportunities to assess or monitor the extent to which tamariki *children* have learned are not yet identified. This delay is an intentional one, designed to allow teachers time to focus on refining their teaching without the pressure of assessment (MacLeod C. personal communication, 10 April 2025).

- Learning Resources.

The final piece of the planning puzzle is a folder that contains in excess of 50 files useful for teaching the achievement objectives and learning intentions. Among these are those named in the Suggested Learning Sequence or imaged on the visual overview. Most of the files are worksheets of written and craft-style activities, but the folder also contains power-points of content to use with children. It is here that the flexibility of the programme becomes both obvious and, at times, confusing. Multiple documents give the same information: overviews, Phase Level learning packs, and teaching and learning sequences, for example. The presence of 'newer' and 'older' material also adds to the confusion. Experience tells us that many teachers will go directly to this end-point to access the curriculum, which is rarely the best option. Hyperlinks back to the founding documents do their best to build a fuller sense of design. However, the challenge of providing teaching resources that satiate a pragmatic desire to 'do' within a wider context of 'why' or 'what' is a sober reminder that transitioning from theory into practice is a risky business.

- Overview Documents.

Two further overviews are provided in the primary phases: one tabulates a simple matching of the achievement objectives and learning intentions with a few suggestions of activities and teaching points. The second is a visual overview. As the name suggests, it contains actual images of worksheets referenced in the Suggested Learning Sequence against each learning intention. It was made by those preparing the material for Primary Phases, 'a decision that found significant favour with teachers' (Lanner L. personal communication, 16 May 2025).

1.4. Discussion

It is apparent that Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith is the product of deep consideration and consultation. It is also evident that the Catholic Schools in Aotearoa NZ face many of the issues experienced by their compatriots in Australia. Teachers whose knowledge of Catholic faith and tradition is limited, students who struggle to find relevance in an ancient tradition, families who need encouragement to engage with their faith tradition, and a society that proposes much of what the Church does—the well-being of people, an environment that cries out for care, poverty, homelessness, and displacement—without the burden (or benefit) of belief in God all challenge the role and purpose of the Catholic school.

However, three things stand out as unique to Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith.

First, the bringing of Catholic Schools under the Integration Act was a significant win for the Catholic Church of Aotearoa NZ, enshrining in law the right for schools to maintain their special character (MacLeod C. personal communication, 27 May 2025). Indeed, the binding nature of the agreement commits political parties of all persuasion to the Act, guaranteeing Catholic schools not only the right to teach and live their special character but to ensure that the population of a school, staff and students, remains mostly Catholic. This gives Catholic schools in Aotearoa NZ a level of clarity and security in their identity 'that is internationally unique, [one that] puts Catholic Education is an extremely strong position' (MacLeod C. personal communication, 27 May 2025). Catholic Schools can 'have their cake and eat it. If they fulfil their obligations, the Crown won't let them down' (New Zealand Catholic Education Office n.d.).

Arguably, the most vexed question in Australia concerns a school's Catholic Identity, specifically, when does a school stop 'being Catholic?' As the number of Catholic schools in which Catholic staff and students are in the minority increases, is there something that Catholic schools in Australia might learn from the Aotearoa NZ story?

Second, its solidarity in its flexibility. Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith is a national curriculum, written for all Dioceses in Aotearoa NZ. As such, all Catholic schools work

with the same content and standards. This allows for high levels of collegial support. However, it also opens the possibility for the collection of data at the national and local levels, useful in monitoring the implementation of the programme across diverse cohort groups. As individual schools work in different ways with the same content to the same standard, research into the impact of factors, such as pedagogy, resources, local initiatives or teacher knowledge or experience, could contribute important new understandings of what makes religious education effective. Further, research into the effectiveness of the 'bridging objective' as a means of encouraging formal classroom learning to be applied in the wider life of the school could also bring new understandings of the Catholic school as a vehicle for both education and formation.

The level of unity achieved by Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith has not been possible in Australia. In the state of Victoria alone, a drive of only three hours will bring you into contact with four different religious education curricula, all with their own approach, standard, and content base. While this diversity keeps the debate about the purpose and role of religious education in Catholic schools alive and well, it does not allow for strong collaboration between Dioceses and teaching colleagues. It also makes the study of religious education by those wishing to teach in Catholic schools much more complex: which view of religious education, which approach, which pedagogy, and whose objectives?

Finally, the most notable feature of Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith is the strong, explicit commitment to the inclusion of the Māori language, evident in both the translation of English terms into Māori and the use of words and terms that originate in Māori. It is this latter use of Māori that stands out as both visionary and provocative; thus, it warrants particular comment.

The subtitle of this paper, Ko tōku reo tōku ohooho, ko tōku reo tōku māpihi maurea, *my language is my awakening, my language is the window to my soul*, is attributed to Sir Tīmoti Kāretu (Powell 2020). The proverb is reminiscent of that of the Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein (1961), who argued that the limit of our language meant the limit of our world. In completely different contexts, cultures, and eras, these quotes make it clear that the words we use matter. Language is more than simply a means of communication, of naming, asking, and responding. Language allows us to test and clarify our thoughts and to develop and share new insights. In language, we access the world we live in; in language, we interpret this world and consider who we are within it. Most significantly, in language, we express what we believe and what we hold to be true, to our very soul, to the presence of God within us.

The complexity of saying what you mean is magnified when a decision is made to work in more than one tongue. The meaning of words is deeply intertwined in the culture in which they develop, its beliefs, values, and even vocab and grammatical structures (Hymes 2024). A page titled Ki te ao marama (untranslated) explains three Māori words, each of which it is hoped will 'develop an understanding and the ability to listen more deeply to others' stories' (NCRS 2024, p. 21). Aroha is explained as compassion, love, and forgiveness. In a quote attributed to the late Catholic theologian Msgr. Henare Tate, it is described as 'being in the presence of the breath of God' (NCRS 2024, p. 21). Whanaungatanga is said to be about building relationships, about being inclusive. 'Other expressions that are very close to whanaungatanga are family-ness or belonging' (NCRS 2024, p. 21). 'Manaakitanga speaks to our desire to make others feel and be welcomed, to provide hospitality, care, an awareness of their needs' (NCRS 2024, p. 21). It is a way of life that emphasises the well-being of individuals and communities through acts of service, inclusivity, and reciprocal relationships. Aroha, whanaungatanga, and manaakitanga are not translations of English words. Rather, they express Māori thought and belief, Māori understanding of the world, and Māori understanding of how humanity can and should act within it. Translation is,

thus, difficult and clumsy. In the field of linguistics, the term 'intercultural competence' refers to knowing that different cultures express ideas, concepts, and traditions differently. As demonstrated in the three examples above, it recognises that simple word-for-word translations often fail to capture the nuances, idioms, or cultural implications that are essential to conveying the meaning found in the culture of origin (Carswell et al. 2025). In irony hard to overlook, even what the page title, Ki te ao marama, means is unclear, with my online translator suggesting either *to the world of light* or *to the world of understanding*.

Whether the writers of Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith have been successful in capturing the meaning of individual Māori words, in translation or explanation, is beyond the expertise of this paper. What is clear, though, is that in Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith, the NCRS has shone a light on the role of culture and language in the expression and transmission of faith. In his thesis, Tate (2010) argues that 'the traditional Christian message that Māori have received has always fallen short of speaking intimately and powerfully to Māori experience in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many Māori experience it as irrelevant to their lives. The received theology is not couched in terms of concept, imagery, language, theology and liturgy that speak to them as to who they are in this land, in this contemporary society, and in terms of their relationships'. Tate calls for a second stage of evangelisation, one which comes from within. 'Māori people must become the subjects, the doers, of their own theology. Theology cannot simply be received "from elsewhere, as if there simply existed a monocultural theology having universal claims to truth and relevance to Māori and indeed to all cultures"' (Tate 2010).

As I have read Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith, I have reflected upon Tate's concerns and on how religious education might do 'to' people rather than 'with' them. To what extent do the words we use in religious education assist—or inhibit—the transmission of faith? What might 'theology from within' look like in a Catholic school? This paper now turns to suggest a small but significant shift in the teaching of scripture as a response to Tate's concerns. As a discussion about faith begins with the existence of God, this proposal focuses on Biblical metaphors for God and on how we speak about the nature of the God whom Catholics profess.

2. Part 2: A New Hermeneutical Lens

2.1. Introduction

The last twenty years have seen unprecedented interest in the placement and teaching of the Bible in Religious Education in Catholic schools (Holm 1983; Erdozain 1983; Madgen 1993; Stead 1996; Carswell 2018a; Grace 2003; Pollefeyt and Bieringer 2005). Recognition that our presentation of scripture within religious education curricula has leaned towards proof texting has brought a determined shift in practice, one that has brought the application of exegetical practices to the teaching of scripture (Carswell 2018b). This has been a good move, one that has repositioned scripture so that we teach, rather than simply use, passages (Stead 1996). A hermeneutical approach to scripture has undoubtedly been of benefit to both the Bible and to its readers, who are now invited to understand God's presence in the world through the wrapping of an author who puts their experience of belief into thoughts and words (Bowie and Coles 2018; Carswell 2018b). The similarity between what biblical scholarship understands, what the authors of our sacred text have done, and what Tate asks that his people be allowed to do is stark. It would, therefore, be a small shift in practice to bring an additional hermeneutical lens to the teaching of scripture and allow students to 'do theology from within'. Such a lens would go beyond simply teaching students to be interpreters of the God-words of others. Rather, it would position them in imitation of the practice of the Bible's authors and ask them to be creators of their own God-words, drawn from their own culture and language.

2.2. Beginning with God

The Catholic Church has an interesting relationship with language used to speak about God. Augustine of Hippo argued that if you thought you understood God, it could not be God. Anselm of Canterbury similarly proposed 'that God is that which none greater can be conceived' (Johnson 1965). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) embraces belief in the unknowable-ness of God as the reason we must 'continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image-bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God—"the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable"—with our human representations' (42). In spite of this insistence, the language for God used by the Church is exceptionally limited, narrowed to only a few of the many options the Bible offers us.

2.3. Metaphors for God in the Bible

The literary form used most often in the Bible to speak of God is the metaphor, where God (the subject) is said to be something else (the vehicle). The Bible's authors reveal a strong preference for anthropomorphic vehicles: 'king', 'judge', 'husband', 'father', and 'master' dominate other vehicles, such as 'warrior' and 'physician'. A smaller but still significant number of metaphors use an inanimate or animate vehicle: 'fortress', 'dry wadi', 'mother bear', and 'eagle'. Finally, the smallest number of vehicles use a personally experienced reality to speak of God: 'love', 'justice', or 'forgiveness' (Carswell 2006). Placed side by side within a single work, or appearing in a range of different books, such metaphors extend, even contradict, one another so that the depth and ambiguity of the nature of God is clearly evident. That God could be both a divine leader of armies and a woman giving birth moves us closer to what Augustine and Anselm had in mind (Mills 1998).

What is of interest to this paper is less the multiplicity of metaphors for God used in the Bible, but more the process that has brought them to us. The vehicles chosen for metaphors are taken from the everyday experiences of the people creating them. Written in a patriarchal culture by men, the Bible's authors describe God through their experiences of being male in a male-ruled society. In the Old Testament, the authors display a clear preference for the vehicle 'king', used sixteen times in the book of Psalms alone. In contrast, references to God as 'father' are rare. Indeed, within the forty-six First Testament books that the Catholic Church accepts as canonical, God is only referred to as 'father' twelve times, and never in direct address (Schneiders 1986). In the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, an almost complete reversal occurs. Surprisingly, given its dominance in the Old Testament, direct reference to God as king vanishes in the Gospels, although it remains behind every one of the many references to the kingdom of God made by Jesus or his followers (Macky 1990). The vehicle 'father', however, comes to the fore. While some proponents of this vehicle account for its dominance on the basis that it was Jesus's preferred metaphor, this is very difficult to argue. In Mark's gospel, God is referred to as 'father' only four times, and in the Gospel of Luke, seventeen times. Matthew's liking for the vehicle is evident in that it appears more than forty-five times. It is in the Gospel of John where the dominance of this metaphor becomes absolute; God is called 'father' at least 113 times.

This simple tabulation is more than an academic indulgence. It serves to demonstrate three crucial points, each of which offers support for Tate's call. First, the personal preference, audience, and circumstance of the biblical author are responsible for their choice and use of vehicle, equivalent to their reference to landforms, Samaritans, Levites, and vineyards. Gibson (1998) reminds us that it reflects 'their [the creators] conception of the universe, not ours, their reaction to the geography and flora and fauna of Palestine, not ours, their experience of human existence . . . their social organization and customs, not

ours' (p. 10). Second, the metaphors that we use to speak about God are neither fixed nor definitive. Rather, as the needs and lives of people change, so does the way they speak about God. Finally, while some metaphors are dominant at certain times in history, no metaphor for God is better than any other; each one is as inadequate as the others. Metaphors only ever give a glimpse of God; they are always less than the magnitude of God.

What these points make clear is that a blueprint for Tate's 'theology from within' is found in the Bible, modelled by the authors of our sacred text. From within their varying environments, the Bible's authors chose things in their lives to speak of God, as they found God, in whatever situation they were in. This observation provides a strong impetus for the inclusion of a practice that asks contemporary people of faith to do likewise and, once again, to 'do theology from within'. However, a further reason to 'think big' is the way that metaphors work. The metaphors that the Bible's authors use allow them to express their thoughts. However, once uttered, their words become the 'thought frame' for others who will formulate—and limit—their own conception of God to the limitations of the words they hear.

2.4. How Metaphors Work

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which some words are used literally while others are used in a sense different from their usual literal one. Often used to express insight about something that cannot be known literally, metaphors work by being nonsensical, thus demanding a process of thought in the finding of meaning. Likened to comparison, but much more than a simple juxtaposition of objects for a point-by-point examination, this thought process is dynamic and multifaceted, a result of the vast array of connotations that words have. Once a metaphor is uttered, all the connotations that the listener has about both the vehicle and subject begin to play together to make the metaphor work and affect communication. Knowledge, accurate or flawed; belief, primal or developed; and feelings and attitudes, positive or negative, even previous metaphorical associations, are brought together and in an action likened to that of a sieve; some attributes are found to offer useful insight into the subject and kept, while others are sifted away.

A description of the dominant metaphor for God used in the Gospels, God is our father, serves as an example. In calling God 'father', human fatherhood becomes the 'playground' for thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about both God and fathers. Attributes of human fatherhood that offer insight into the nature of God are retained, while those considered inappropriate or irrelevant are sifted away or discarded. Indeed, it is the 'is/is not' tension created by the retention/discarding process that prevents the metaphor from being literalised: God *is not* a father at the exact moment that God *is* a father. Within the frame of the metaphor, a concept of God, as like and different from fathers, is imagined and posited. Further, through extension, speaking of God as our father establishes the production of other 'off-shoot' metaphors, which comment much more extensively on humanity and the world (Carswell 2006). Men and women become the adopted sons and daughters of God, the children of God who become a family, brothers and sisters in faith. In the use of one metaphor an understanding not only of God, but of God's relationship with humanity, and of humanity's relationship with one another, is proposed.

The way that metaphors work marks them as much more than simply a clever tool of communication. Rather, they are a stimulus for a unique intellectual activity in which the mind holds thoughts of two things together at one time, as it forms a conception of the subject brought about by its association with the named vehicle. For those who create them, metaphors for God enable thought about God to be put into words. Once verbalised, however, they become a frame for and around the thoughts of those who hear them. Put

simply, the metaphors we use to speak about God directly determine how the people around us will think about God and, as a result, come to perceive God. While this means that metaphors offer rich possibilities in our speech about God, they are not without issue.

Whatever thought process is prompted by a metaphor, it is tightly contained by the parameters of the vehicle, which acts as a containment line within which thought occurs. If I consistently hear God called a 'warrior', 'fortress', or 'shield', my thoughts will be limited to notions of warfare, enemies, and battle. Any thought of God as tenderness, compassion, giver of life, or forgiveness will not enter my mind. Further, if the vehicle used in the metaphor is distasteful or undesirable to the hearer, then these feelings will likely be transferred to the subject. If the vehicle is unknown to the hearer, the metaphor will fail completely. Rather than beyond all knowing, the limitation of the words I hear can make God appear small and narrow, even repugnant. For Van Wijk-Bos, this has a catastrophic effect not only on God but on the self-perception of the hearer. 'When we deny God the freedom to be who God will be, we also deny ourselves the freedom to be who and what we can be in the gracious free presence of God' (Van Wijk-Bos 1995, p. 101).

3. Theology from Within

From within my world, our small farm outside Melbourne, my metaphors for God are overwhelmingly natural. God is a mother cow who, with tongue and soft moo, calls her newly born calf into life. God is the dust sweeping across a drought-ravaged land. God is a warm egg, the breath of my horse on a cold day. As a mother who has recently buried her child, God is an empty dam. In absolute imitation of the authors of the Bible, I can stand in the space of my life and, doing theology from within, use all that I sense and feel to put words around what I know of God. And as my thoughts turn into words, the God who is part of my world in all its struggles and pain is as close as the breath of my horse and the dryness of my dam. My sense of God is more than simply expressed in the metaphors I use; it is professed, confirmed, and made tangible. And, perhaps as you read them, you may see through the limits of my language and into my soul. You may even be invited to extend your own thoughts of God. But I am drawn to ask about the people of my hometown, the numerous tribes descended from the people of the Tainui, about their experience of God (Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal 2025). Does their relationship with the longest river in New Zealand, the Waikato, prompt and carry their thought and language of God? Or for the Kāhui Maunga tribes, is God as dramatic and as eternal as the range of mountains that cross their land? Or as reliable and as constant as the seasons of winter snow and red tussock?

And, if I dare to look further, what about the Tiwi people of Bathurst and Melville Islands, off the coast of Darwin? Or the Arrernte people of Ltyentye Apurte, 80 km outside Alice Springs, how would they speak of God? What of their land, and their lives, speaks to them of God now? Especially in countries like Aotearoa NZ and Australia, where the desire to restore indigenous culture and language shattered by colonisation is acute, Tate's call for his people resonates more widely. It is much more than a nicety; it is a call for action towards reconciliation and justice. And, in doing so, it asks for nothing more than what the Bible's authors accomplished and what I have accomplished, to speak of God from within.

4. Conclusions

This paper finds that while much of the new religious education curriculum for Aotearoa NZ is very like other curricula, in its extraordinary commitment to the inclusion of Māori, Tō Tātou Whakapono Our Faith throws open the doors to much greater discussion about the way that culture and language contribute to the expression and transmission of faith. Responding to Tate's insistence that we must abandon the view that 'there simply

existed a monocultural theology having universal claims to truth and relevance to Māori and indeed to all cultures', this paper proposes the inclusion of a new hermeneutical lens in the teaching of scripture (Tate 2010). Built on the example of the Bible's authors, who practice and model theology from within, this lens would position students not only as interpreters of the God-talk of others but as the creators of God-talk of their own, using the words and experiences of their own culture.

In advocating a new hermeneutical lens, this paper does not argue for the discontinuation of traditional metaphors for God, such as 'father' or 'king'. We need a common language to speak of God. Neither does it argue that we should stop teaching pupils what the Bible is or ignore exegetical approaches that help them understand the words its authors use or their cultural and historical settings. However, it does argue that to limit our speech about God, even to that of the Bible's authors, is to limit our perception of the 'inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable' God that Catholics proclaim (CCC42).

The monotheism of the Bible is stretched by competing, at times even contradictory, metaphors for God. The Bible's authors exercise a level of freedom in their speech about God that we have either overlooked or are too frightened to embrace. How big might God be if we all spoke to each other of God as we found God? How constant, how eternally relevant, might God be if our speech about God was both ancient and new? And how validating of those people whose culture and language have been silenced by colonisation, if we began venerating their words as we venerate the words of our sacred text? Not just in translation but in creation and in thought. For the Catholic Church to be truly Catholic—*catholic*—we need to listen to and follow the example of our sacred text and speak to one another of God, in our own tongue, from our own experience.

Kia tau ki runga i a koutou ngā whakapai a te Atua (Tate 2010).

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Article

The Perceptions of Early Career Teachers Regarding the Teaching of Religious Education in Catholic Schools in Western Australia

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of early career teachers (ECTs) regarding the teaching of Religious Education in Catholic schools in Western Australia. The study used a constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist theoretical perspective to explore participant perceptions. The methodology underpinning the study was an instrumental case study. Data were collected through an online survey of 91 ECTs. The results highlighted reasons motivating participants to teach Religious Education, the enjoyable aspects and challenges they experienced, the personal and professional support they received in their teaching of Religious Education, their perceived relevance of university training, and how they believed their university helped improve their confidence in teaching Religious Education.

Keywords: Religious Education (RE); Early Career Teachers (ECTs); motivation; challenges

1. Introduction

Early career teachers (ECTs) appear to lack confidence in teaching Religious Education (Buchanan 2022; Hackett 2009; Law-Davis and Topliss 2022). For instance, Hackett (2009) commented that beginning Religious Education (RE) teachers face multiple personal and professional challenges. These challenges include lacking confidence in teaching the curriculum due to their perceived lack of experience and/or training. More recently, Challinor et al. (2022) highlighted that while many ECTs of RE expected to teach in the learning area, teaching RE was one of the most "challenging aspects" of the role due to not being "appropriately equipped to answer the questions asked by their students in Religious Education lessons" (p. 129). Similarly, Law-Davis and Topliss (2022), found a number of key factors associated with ECTs' confidence in teaching RE. These factors included the offering of quality RE and Theology courses at university, the influence of family religious background, and whether the ECT had experienced a Catholic education while growing up. The purpose of the research project is to explore the perceptions of ECTs in their first and second years with respect to teaching RE in Catholic schools in Western Australia (WA). Considering the purpose of the research, there was one research question: What are the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the teaching of Religious Education in Catholic schools in Western Australia? There are seven sub questions linked to the research question:

1. What motivates early career teachers to teach RE?
2. What do early career teachers perceive as the enjoyable aspects of teaching RE?
3. What do early career teachers believe are the challenges of teaching RE?
4. What personal support do early career teachers receive in teaching RE?

5. What professional support do early career teachers receive in teaching RE?
6. What do early career teachers believe is the relevance of their university training?
7. How has their university training helped improve early career teachers' confidence in teaching RE?

2. Review of Literature

There appears to be a paucity of literature specifically about the perceptions of ECTs regarding teaching RE in Catholic schools in WA. This dearth of literature, however, highlights the significance of this study. Initially, the terms 'Religious Education' and 'Teacher Accreditation to Teach Religious Education' are explored in the context of this study, followed by a review of literature related to challenges experienced by ECTs of RE. Finally, there is a focus on the need for support given to ECTs in the areas: content knowledge, teaching methods, and faith formation.

Religious Education

Religious Education refers to a specific learning area in Catholic education. The governing body, Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA 2024) emphasised that it is the central aim of the Religious Education programme delivered in a Catholic school to "help students learn the teachings of the Gospel as proclaimed by the Catholic Church" (para. 1). All students in attendance at Western Australian Catholic schools undertake RE as a part of their study. Religious Education is considered an academic subject and as such comprises a curriculum and is timetabled into the teaching and learning undertaken in the school setting. In the early years of school, "RE is provided at the level of raising children's religious awareness. This approach to RE is not uncommon, with other Australian and international diocese adopting RE as a learning area focused on content delivery" (Robinson 2023, p. 3). In the primary system, RE is taught by a primary generalised teacher, whereas in the secondary school, RE is taught by a specialist teacher.

Religious Education teachers are called to teach the content of this important subject in Catholic education. The Western Australian Bishops (CECWA 2009), however, strongly emphasised the integral notion of vocation, calling on the lay faithful to be "to be inspiring models of the Christian vocation in the world" (para. 41). A sense of vocation is defined for Catholics as a calling from God (NCEC 2017). The term originates from the Latin word 'vocare' meaning 'to call' (CECWA 2009). In 2017 the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) elaborated the importance of vocation indicating that the purpose of a Catholic School is dependent on the Christian vocation of educators and teachers. The late Pope Francis (2013) stated that vocation "is a response to a call and to a call of love" (p. 4).

Teacher Accreditation to Teach Religious Education

Regardless of the age of the children they teach, all Western Australian teachers of RE in Catholic education are required to undertake Accreditation to Teach Religious Education (CEWA 2023, p. 11). So too, leaders in Catholic schools are required to gain Accreditation for Leadership (CEWA 2023, p. 12) which is inclusive of accreditation to teach the learning area of RE. Catholic education in other Australian states and territories have similar accreditation policies to ensure that teachers are competent in the delivery of scriptural and theological principles embedded in RE curriculum, as well as faith formation opportunities (NCEC 2017).

All teachers in Catholic education are expected to uphold the Catholic ethos through their teaching and example, so as to aid in the harmonising of faith, life and culture in the school environment (NCEC 2025, para. 4). Accreditation policies pertaining to the area of teaching RE in a Catholic school are grounded in The Code of Canon Law and the vision of

the Church (NCEC 2025, para. 5). The NCEC (2025) stated that Catholic school RE teachers, as well as leaders in the Catholic school setting, require specific skills and knowledge. The NCEC (2025) stipulated that RE educators, as well as leaders in Catholic schools, "require additional professional competence in scripture, theology, religious education and faith formation and a developed sense of confidence in their delivery" (para. 4).

Challenges for ECTs of RE

Gaining this professional competence and confidence presents a challenge for many early career RE teachers. Their confidence, or lack thereof, in teaching RE is perceived as a significant challenge by some scholars (Buchanan 2022; Hackett 2009; Law-Davis and Topliss 2022; Whitworth 2020), perhaps because they do not feel they possess the richness of knowledge and understanding of theological principles and scripture that their more experienced RE teaching colleagues may exhibit. Whitworth (2020) proposed that extensive training is needed to help early career RE educators develop a deep understanding of the complex nature of their specialist subject.

Initial research by Hackett (2009) identified that ECTs of RE face multiple personal and professional challenges. These challenges included lacking confidence in teaching the curriculum due to their perceived lack of experience and/or training. Further, some newly assigned RE teachers felt there was a personal dissonance with the curriculum due to their perceived personal or religious character (Hackett 2009). This longitudinal research of Hackett (2009) foregrounded the need to provide newly assigned RE teachers with holistic and ongoing formation as a means of fostering their faith, as well as building their knowledge and sense of efficacy in RE teaching. More recently, Law-Davis and Topliss (2022) highlighted similar findings in their research.

Content knowledge, teaching methods and faith formation

Recent research reveals that participation in comprehensive teaching methods and tertiary theology courses, in conjunction with extensive practical classroom teaching experience, helps pre-service teachers and ECTs gain and develop rich pedagogical practices (Law-Davis and Topliss 2022). In turn, these practices foster student learning of the RE curriculum. Meanwhile, formal and informal mentoring of pre-service teachers and ECTs of RE is seen to benefit their confidence in teaching the subject (Law-Davis and Topliss 2022; Topliss 2020). The ongoing faith formation of ECTs of RE is seen as integral (Hackett 2009; NCEC 2024) and complementary to their vocation as RE educators. There are various challenges faced by ECTs of RE (Buchanan 2022; Cullen 2019; Hackett 2009; Law-Davis and Topliss 2022; Topliss 2020). More research in this field is warranted to add to the literature to the field.

3. Significance of the Research

The significance of the research is threefold. First, there appears a lack of research on the perceptions of ECTs of RE. Second, the results of the research may provide guidelines for Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) to support more effectively ECTs of RE. Third, the research may inform universities in ways to prepare preservice teachers more effectively to deal with the challenges they may face in teaching RE.

4. Methods

The research methods underpinning this study include a constructivist worldview and an instrumental case study methodology.

5. Constructivism

Within a constructivist approach, meaning is associated with the mind and is constructed, rather than discovered. People, moreover, can construct meaning in different ways. A person's view is generated by their response to, and linked with, a subject and an object (Crotty 1998). The goal of constructivist research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views on the situation being studied (Creswell and Creswell 2018). That is, the goal is to understand what is meaningful or relevant to the people being studied from their standpoint (Neuman 2011). In light of this constructivist approach, participants were given the opportunity to explore their perceptions of teaching RE in their own words.

6. Instrumental Case Study

An instrumental case study uses a case to gain insight into a phenomenon where the case is not the focus (Universal Class 2025). In this instance, the case entails early career teachers of Religious Education in Catholic schools in Western Australia. The phenomenon under review is the experiences of these teachers of Religious Education. It just happens that these early career teachers are in Western Australia.

7. Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Notre Dame Australia and from the Catholic Education of Western Australia Research Review Panel (2024-062F). Following approval, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose and scope of the research, the process involved and their right to choose whether to participate or not. They were informed of the data collection method (survey) and provided with a link to the survey. Written consent to participate in the research took the form of participants completing the survey.

8. Research Participants

A total of 91 first and second year CEWA ECTs completed the survey. Of this number, 18 indicated they taught early childhood, 43 taught primary and 29 taught secondary, with one participant not answering that question. Most participants were under 30 years of age, female, held a Bachelor of Education degree, taught in metropolitan Perth and were in their first year of teaching. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographic information.

Table 1. Demographic Information.

Category	Demographic Information
Teaching Area	Early childhood: 18 (20%) Primary: 43 (48%) Secondary: 29 (32%)
Age Range (years)	20–24: 50 (55%) 25–29: 20 (22%) 30–34: 9 (10%) >34: 12 (13%)
Gender	Female: 72 (79%) Male: 19 (21%)
Qualification	Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary): 74 (81%) Master of Teaching: 16 (18%) Other: 1 (2%)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Category	Demographic Information
School Location	Metropolitan: 68 (75%) Regional: 21 (23%) Remote: 2 (2%)
Teaching Experience	1st Year: 77 (85%) 2nd Year: 14 (15%)

9. Data Collection

A survey was completed by first- and second-year teachers of RE in WA who attended six CEWA sponsored gatherings of ECTs in Term 3, 2024. The survey was administered with the support of CEWA personnel. Four of these meetings occurred in metropolitan Perth and two in regional Western Australia. In each case, a member of the research team addressed the participants, provided the information sheet, the link to the survey and answered any questions.

The survey underwent a three-stage development prior to it being administered. First, the research team brainstormed potential questions in the light of the purpose of the study, the research question and current literature on early career Religious Education teachers. Second, two CEWA personnel responsible for supporting ECTs were consulted and their suggestions incorporated into a first draft.Third, two university colleagues who teach Religious Education pedagogy to preservice teachers, were asked to review and comment on the survey.

The survey was in two parts. The first part contained demographic quantitative questions relating to teaching area, age, gender teaching qualification, school location and teaching experience. Part 2 contained qualitative open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perceptions of teaching RE. These questions explored participants' experiences as to why they were teaching RE, the enjoyable aspects of teaching RE, the challenges of teaching RE, the personal and professional support they received to teach RE, relevance of university training, and how their university helped improve their confidence in teaching RE.

10. Data Analysis

The data from the quantitative survey questions were analysed using descriptive statistics. Two of the researchers undertook this analysis, which was subsequently scrutinised by the other two researchers. The data from the qualitative survey questions were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach applied in qualitative research to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within the data (Clarke and Braun 2017). It entails several steps which include familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Specifically, all four researchers reviewed the qualitative responses from the survey and independently identified promising themes. The final themes were established following several iterative reviews.

11. Results

The results present the qualitative participant responses to the seven open-ended survey questions which reflect the sub questions in this study. These questions explored participants' experiences as to why they were teaching RE, the enjoyable aspects of teaching RE, the challenges of teaching RE, the personal and professional support they received to teach RE, relevance of university training, and how their university helped improve their confidence in teaching RE.

Participants indicated two central reasons why they taught RE. Many felt strongly about religion and Catholic education and perceived teaching RE as a vocation. For example, one participant explained, "I have always wanted to teach RE and teach in a Catholic school because it aligns with my values. I feel this is my vocation". Another participant wrote, "It is something I am super-passionate about. The values and lessons it teaches not only kids, but adults too, is amazing". A third participant indicated, "I chose to teach in a CEWA school as I liked the idea of a Christ-centred education". A fourth participant stated, "I was offered a prac at a Catholic school and I fell in love with the culture. Upon finishing my prac, I applied for a position at the school". Many participants emphasised their Catholic background as a reason why they taught RE. Comments included "I am Catholic myself and have always enjoyed learning about religion", "because I am Catholic", "personal experience, family background", "born into a Catholic family, living a Christian life and attending Church".

Participants enjoyed teaching RE. First, they pointed to the quality conversations and interactions that teaching RE enabled them to experience with their students. The words 'conversations' and 'discussions' were frequently mentioned in participant responses. As an example, one participant wrote, "the conversations we have as a class when we dive into the teachings from the Bible. We have amazing discussions. Teaching religion makes me so happy". Another participant indicated, "getting to talk more openly. Children open up and describe their connection with God and how they feel". A third participant indicated, "students discussing their thoughts and feelings about the world and their faith". Second, participants enjoyed making the course content relevant to students. Comments included "hearing students use what they are learning to make sense of the world", "the real-life teachings that come from the parables", "about making Jesus real", "hearing students apply their learning to everyday social situations and linking gospel stories to life-skills", and "helping my students become the best versions of themselves through the lessons of the Bible". Third, participants enjoyed developing the Catholic faith, values, spirituality and morals in their students. One participant wrote, "I enjoy how RE fosters students' spirituality and holistic approach to life". Another participant noted, "passing on the values and beliefs of Catholicism to my students and creating an environment where my students feel supported and cared for". A third participant stated, "connecting and exploring topics of faith with students. Sharing my experiences".

Participants raised five challenging aspects of teaching RE: the number of students in the class who were not Catholic, not having enough teaching background on the course content, student questioning that goes into content beyond their knowledge, concerns with the curriculum and the level of student engagement. Some participants raised challenges over the fact that some students in their RE class were not Catholic. As one participant stated, "minimal students are Catholic, so having full engagement can be difficult". Another participant noted "the diverse range of backgrounds and beliefs in the class" with another participant highlighting the challenge of "making the learning inclusive and relevant to these students". A few participants raised the challenge of their own insufficient content knowledge. As one participant explained, "not having enough teacher background, not understanding the material or how to make it more relatable". Linked with this challenge was the associated challenge, of, in the words of one participant, "student questioning that goes into content beyond teacher knowledge". Another participant expressed this concern as follows, "I wasn't brought up religious so it's hard when they have questions".

The RE curriculum provided various challenges to the participants. Comments included, "some of the topics are a little dry", "curriculum is slightly dated. A lot of the resources are not applicable anymore", "kindy—no set curriculum—quite vague", "at times it is difficult for primary aged students to understand, comprehend". Finally, participants

raised challenges regarding student engagement. The word 'engagement' occurred quite frequently in participants' responses to this question. Comments on engagement included "some students resent religion, which I find permeates into their behaviour", "behaviour issues in RE", "no support from parents", "justifying why it needs to be taught", and "student stigma that it will be their least favourite subject and that it won't be fun".

The participants indicated three forms of personal support: key personnel, their own Catholic background and Catholic Education Western Australia. Key personnel included mentors, Religious Education coordinators, "a heavily involved parish priest", the principal as well as "friends and partners". Participants' own Catholic background provided a sense of support for many. Comments included "being Catholic myself", "involvement in my church and teaching children's liturgy", "my family is Catholic", and "religious family around me". Finally, participants commented on the personal support they received from university preparation, CEWA through such avenues as the RE curriculum and prepared lessons, CEWA website and professional development. When asked about professional support, participants again identified school mentors, CEWA personnel and professional learning opportunities as the main forms of professional support they could access.

Participant responses varied considerably when questioned on the relevance of their university teacher training as preparation to teach RE. Many found "it was great", "appropriate", "very relevant" and provided "good basics". Others believed it was "adequate" or "somewhat" relevant. There were those who believed "it was not relevant enough", "not very", "not appropriate at all", "not super relevant and didn't help me teach RE". Participants were generally positive in their responses to how their university helped their confidence in teaching RE. For example, one participant stated, "provided me with information on the CEWA units of work, learning programmes and prayer assemblies". Another participant noted, "it gave me the skills to teach RE". A third participant observed, "I wouldn't know where to start if I didn't have the training". A fourth participant wrote, "it gave me good teaching skills and strategies on the content". However, some participants were less complimentary: "it hasn't", "not much", "slightly", and "it hasn't done much".

12. Discussion

Participants highlighted two key reasons as to why they were teaching Religious Education: a sense of vocation; and their Catholic background. These two reasons are evident in research about what motivates teachers to teach Religious Education (Hackett et al. 2017; Law-Davis and Topliss 2022; Topliss 2020). First, in considering how one's teaching can impact the lives of their students, it is clear the word vocation may have an active and positive impact on Religious Educators (Francis 2013). Without a love for teaching Religious Education, or indeed teaching one's students with love, or exhibiting a love for God, a calling for Religious Educators would otherwise just become another aspect of one's work.

Second, participants mentioned the importance of their own Catholic family background on their teaching of Religious Education. Pope Francis (2016) highlighted the importance of family influencing one's vocation and the importance of family on one's faith background may also affect the confidence needed to teach RE (Law-Davis and Topliss 2022).

In this study, participants strongly affirmed their enjoyment of teaching RE. They suggested reasons such as quality interactions with their students; making course content relevant to the lives of the students; and developing Catholic faith, values, spirituality and morals in their students. Delicata (2019) reflected the notion of enjoying quality interactions with students. She suggested the role of a Religious Educator was to display "…compassion, of sacrifice, of patient waiting, to accompany the child along every step of the way" (p. 97). Cullen (2019) also advocated the value of quality interactions that

RE teachers have with their students and how this can then affect their confidence in teaching RE.

The ECTs highlighted the challenge of a lack of student and parent engagement in RE. Franchi and Rymarz (2017) importantly observed this trend in stating, "What needs to be brought to the forefront of the discussion of cultural context is that this pattern of socialisation is no longer a factor in the lives of most Catholics" (p. 3). The NCEC (2018) defined this challenge as "Increasingly Australians and other western societies experience an erosion of tradition. . .In this cultural setting, being Catholic or being religious effectively becomes one choice among many" (p. 8). Mixa (2021) further termed this challenge as one of 'pre-evangelisation'. The research highlighted the importance families played in engaging their children in faith experiences and considered it vital for ECTs to consider this reality and to look at ways of addressing this challenge as part of their school's Religious Education and Evangelisation planning. The results also raised the importance of creating quality interactions in RE for students through modelling biblical storytelling strategies to ECTs that deepen theological and sacramental knowledge. As supported by multiple authors, biblical storytelling is a significant teaching strategy in RE (Hyde 2010; Irwin 2018; Robinson and Fic 2021). Similarly, Cullen (2019) raised how biblical storytelling may also assist with a student's connection with God.

Multiple personal and professional supports including mentors, colleagues, principals, a Catholic background, and the support of the system authority, CEWA, were cited as significant to the ECTs. Topliss (2017) promulgated the requirement for system-based training for mentors that may better provide more direct feedback to ECTs when teaching Religious Education. Black et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of the system authority in supporting school leaders working with ECTs and raised concerns about an apparent lack of support faced by ECTs. System authority planning for ongoing personal and professional support, including faith formation opportunities, may assist ECTs of Religious Education. Hicks (2025) noted the importance of spiritual growth in the deepening of a person's spirituality and connection with God. However, a realisation from the ECT study is that the role of parents has changed from one where students previously attended Mass with parents on a Sunday to where the school is seen as the modern representation of 'Church' (Sultmann et al. 2021). This fact elevates the importance needed for the ongoing development of system faith-formation programmes for ECTs, training for the ECTs' mentors who accompany the ECT pastorally on their teaching journey and ongoing system support through professional development for all leaders of Religious Education in Catholic schools (Poncini 2024; Topliss and Leber 2023).

ECTs also appeared ambivalent on the value of their university preparation. Some participants believed their university preparation was not sufficient to prepare them to teach Religious Education. Others also found that their university training in RE was quite useful to improve their confidence in teaching RE (Poncini 2024). This area is worthy of further research and will be discussed in the concluding section.

13. Limitations to the Research

There was one potential limitation to the research. Not all CEWA ECTs were able to attend the six gatherings when the data were collected. This fact may have an impact on the generalisability of the results.

14. Conclusions

This study set out to explore the perceptions of early career RE teachers in their first and second year of teaching. Survey responses from the ECTs served to provide insights into their perspectives on the teaching of RE. Six themes emerged from the data

about the ECTs teaching of RE: the enjoyable aspects of teaching RE, the challenges of teaching RE, the personal and professional support they received to teach RE, relevance of university training, and how their university helped improve their confidence in teaching RE. These themes suggest that whilst pre-service teachers and ECTs enjoyed teaching RE, they faced challenges in this teaching which included teacher content background knowledge, concerns with the curriculum and level of student engagement.

Future research may involve a longitudinal study with the present cohort over the next five years to see if they are still involved in the profession and their perspectives on teaching RE. Further research opportunities could entail a national study exploring ECT RE teachers in different Australian states and territories. Finally, a study could be undertaken that examines the perspectives of principals and leaders in Catholic schools for the best approaches to support ECTs who are teaching RE.

Three recommendations are presented from the research: first, that Catholic Education Western Australia explore ways to promote and develop trained mentors for ECTs of RE; second, that universities preparing teachers of RE look to have both contemporary and appropriate theological and pedagogical content as a way of preparing RE teachers to be classroom-ready; and finally, that Catholic Education Western Australia, The Catholic Institute of Western Australia and The University of Notre Dame Australia develop closer links to prepare teachers of RE in Western Australia. This combined systemic approach may foster a newly accredited mentor training formation programme in RE to assist ECTs with their ongoing formation, system accreditation, and fast-track them from their participation in the programme with a Master's degree credit (NCEC 2017). Part of this training may consider the potential to offer system-wide access to continuous spiritual direction support for mentors, RE leaders and principals (Buchanan 2022).

Early career teachers of RE need teaching experience and ongoing formation to develop their knowledge and understanding. Put simply, early career teachers should not be expected to arrive at their first teaching post with exemplary knowledge, skills and pedagogy. Rather, they should have foundational knowledge and skills that are developed with classroom teaching experience, mentoring, professional development and opportunities for ongoing faith and spiritual nourishment and development.

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Article

Truth, Beauty and Goodness: Dialogue with the Divine

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Abstract

The nature of Catholic schools is ever-changing, as they increasingly draw upon young people from a wide variety of social, cultural and religious backgrounds. This has often impacted upon religious instruction and people's commitment to and support of the mission and ecclesial identity of the school. For the greater part, Catholic schools are pluralistic in nature. This diversity has become more pronounced in recent decades with the emergence of cultural postmodernity, characterized by a significant shift in people's core values, and their religious beliefs and practices. Catholic schools can effectively respond to these challenges, and to the diversity of their own communities through the provision of a robust Religious Education curriculum that is engaging, promotes dialogue and is characterized by quality pedagogical practices. Through the integration of the Liberal Arts, Sydney Catholic Schools found that Religious Education can be enriched by the search for 'truth, beauty and goodness', which represents a dialogue with the divine.

Keywords: *Gravissimum Educationis*; Religious Education; cultural postmodernity; dialogue; liberal arts

1. Introduction: The Vision of Christian Education

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's, *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Declaration on Christian Education. This seminal document provided a clear articulation of the nature and purpose of education, highlighting the preeminent role of parents as the first educators of their children in faith and life. While the acquisition of knowledge is an important part of education, *Gravissimum Educationis* highlighted that schools needed to offer holistic educational opportunities that promoted a love of learning, developed talents and social skills and fostered the full development of the human person. It has long been considered the 'bedrock' upon which Catholic schools have drawn their inspiration, evolved and flourished (Cleary 2015).

Gravissimum Educationis affirmed that all people have a universal and inalienable right to a quality education which is in accord with their cultural and religious background. This right does not spring solely from the fact that education can help people realize their full potential, develop social consciences and become people who can contribute to society; rather, it proceeds from their inherent human dignity. According to the declaration, "a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which . . . he is a member." Education should be directed towards both individual and social ends.

Through education, young people learn to responsibly exercise personal freedom, contribute to society through service, and develop their capacity for critical thinking and moral reasoning. Education can lead to empowerment and self-actualisation, and it is

essential to the informed exercise of all other rights. *Gravissimum Educationis* detailed the distinctiveness of a Christian Education, where young people are "introduced to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become more aware of the gift of Faith they have received" (Vatican II 1965, n. 2), learn how to worship God through liturgy and through prayer aligning theirs to their beliefs by aligning their personal lives to religious values and truths.

The Declaration on Christian Education recognized that for young people to discover their inherent talents and capacities and fully, actively and meaningfully contribute to society, the culture and atmosphere of Catholic schools must be "animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity" (Vatican II 1965, n. 8). It acknowledged that the mission of Catholic schools rested upon the partnership between the home and the school, and for this to be effective and bear fruit, there needed to be a congruence of values and a shared sense of purpose and mission from both teachers and parents.

This concept of 'shared mission' has become a salient and recurring theme in many of the Church's core documents relating to Catholic education. It was framed as a "spirituality of communion" by St Pope John Paul II (2001, n. 43). This communion was the relationship between parents and teachers, and also that of consecrated people and the lay faithful. The spirituality of communion is a recognition of the diverse gifts of the spirit that exist within ecclesial communities, including Catholic schools, and the relationship of reciprocity that can emerge. The spirituality of communion is desired as the "living breath of the educational community" (Congregation for Catholic Education 2007, n. 16).

In the years following the promulgation of *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Catholic Church has consistently reframed and clarified the fundamental objectives of Catholic education. This has been in response to the ever-increasing effects of cultural postmodernity, which has impacted adversely upon the societal status of religion and has practical applications for the context of faith-based schools. According to Pope Francis, the secularism that has characterized postmodernity has tended to "reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal" (Francis 2013, n. 64). This trend has contributed to a growing relativism, which undermines absolute truths and promotes divergent interpretations of moral and spiritual principles.

Catholic schools are mission focused. By contributing to the evangelizing and catechizing nature and mission of the Church, they respond to the changing religious landscape, which has been increasingly associated with a rise in secularism and religious indifference. This can be considered to be an example of the 'new evangelisation', which was conceived as a response to the problems associated with cultural postmodernity.

2. The Impact of Cultural Postmodernity

The emergence of what has been termed 'postmodernity' in the latter half of the twentieth century has been used to help interpret and explain marked changes in religious beliefs and practices, especially in developed western societies. While there is no agreement between sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists as to the time of transition between modernity and postmodernity, the complex cultural shift in the 1960s is often considered to be a defining moment.

Cultural postmodernity has given rise to individualisation and 'detraditionalisation', both of which have impacted upon religious beliefs and practices throughout the Western world. As with many other social institutions, the authority of the Christian churches, and the plausibility of their narrative has been challenged. The privatization of faith has become increasingly prominent, as individuals have curated their own sets of social norms, values, and epistemological frameworks. In certain cases, the estrangement from numerous religious institutions is not solely attributable to a decline in belief, but rather to a perceived

dissonance between individual value systems and the doctrinal tenets upheld by these churches. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among younger demographics, where it manifests as 'loose affiliation' or 'religious nominalism,' indicating a disconnection that may allow for a personal spiritual identity without full adherence to institutional practices or beliefs (Cleary 2015).

Postmodernity has been characterized by a shift in the relationship between religion and spirituality. While the period has witnessed a decline in the public status and social prominence of religion, and its regular practice by adherents, there has been a significant growth in the number of people who describe themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' (Weigel 2013).

The proliferation and diffusion of spiritualities, including those which are secular in nature, does not mean however that people have totally abandoned the traditional form of 'religious' spirituality. Often young people draw upon an eclectic mix of religious and cultural influences in developing their bricolage of belief and practice, a trend noted by Hervieu-Léger (2006), who suggested the religious traditions "increasingly serve as symbolic repositories of meaning, available for individuals to subjectively use and reuse in different ways." It is most apparent that many of those who self-describe as 'spiritual' represent a number of variations on the human search for God.

Despite the documented decline in religious practice and the rejection of metanarratives associated with postmodernity, sociologists have also pointed to a revival of religion in some parts of the Western world. According to Taylor (2007), many avowed 'secularists' eventually engage in forms of spiritual searching or return to religion itself because "life is fuller, richer, deeper [and] more worthwhile" (p. 5). The religio-spiritual dimension can help bring a sense of wholeness, purpose and meaning. The trend of 'anatheism' (Kearney 2010) has been especially common amongst groups of young people, and it suggests caution about making 'generational generalizations'. Put simply, each and every generation is diverse and is characterized by divergent beliefs, values and practices.

3. The Contemporary Context of Catholic Schools

As increasingly multicultural, multi-faith societies, Australia and New Zealand are pluralistic in nature, and people are generally respectful of the diversity of other people's beliefs and religious adherence. In recent decades, both nations have witnessed significant changes in people's religious affiliations, beliefs and practices. These changes, largely adverse in nature, have been the result of the range of ideologies, 'isms', and socio-cultural trends associated with postmodernity. Postmodernity has given rise to a split between faith and culture, and the fragmentation of families and communities. It has been characterized by "pluralistic social norms and beliefs" (Hodge 2014) and a milieu of indifference to the Christian message.

Catholic schools do not exist within a social vacuum. Rather, they are influenced by, and sometimes reflect, the fabric and nature of the wider society. Catholic schools draw people together from diverse backgrounds and with different sets of beliefs. Shifts in demographics have impacted upon the religious profile of Catholic schools. While many students may identify as being 'Catholic', students are also drawn from other Christian denominations and Faith Traditions, and some are of no faith at all.

The plurality of Catholic schools extends beyond religious diversity, however, and encompasses socio-cultural, intellectual, social and psychological differences. Skeie (2002) asserts that distinctions do exist within pluralistic contexts: 'traditional plurality' represents a cohesive diversity and 'modern plurality' is associated with fragmentation. Skeie (2002) details the benefits of schools responding to and reflecting the "many forms of difference that constitute human life", asserting that within Religious Education curricula

and classrooms plurality should be accepted and respected. This can be achieved through a genuine dialogue that focuses on human concerns, not those of a particular social, cultural or religious group. A similar argument was made by Jackson (2013), who suggested that to be effective, the provision of Religious Education must recognize students' diverse experiences and worldviews. Jackson's work detailed the impact of postmodernity as contributing to the growing plurality of school communities.

Catholic schools are institutions of socialization, specifically religious socialization. They are concerned with the transmission of faith and contribute to the continuity of a religious tradition. However, this does not mean they are immutable. Rather, as institutions they will often experience changes in core values, norms, rituals and beliefs (Hervieu-Léger 1998). Hervieu-Leger has written extensively on the changes associated with postmodernity, referring to "ruptures of memory and to a reorganization of values" (1998). Therefore, this cultural discontinuity compels institutions of socialization to revisit and redefine their mission.

In 2022, the Congregation for Catholic Education released the instruction, *'The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue'*. Drawing upon a treasury of Church documents, the instruction highlights the unique positioning of Catholic schools as the 'most valuable resource for the evangelisation of culture' (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022, n. 95). At the same time, it recognized that some communities experience an 'identity crisis' because of divergent interpretations of being 'Catholic'. This ambiguity is unhealthy, for it can lead to conflict and reduce the effectiveness of a school's evangelical intent.

The instruction is highly relevant for Catholic schools in Australia and New Zealand because it explores how a unity of identity can be forged in the most diverse of communities. The Congregation affirms that, 'everyone has the obligation to recognize, respect and bear witness to the Catholic identity of the school . . . this applies to the teaching staff, the non-teaching personnel, and the pupils and their families' (n. 39). This emphasis upon 'shared responsibility' is very important because the community of the Catholic school involves an intersection of the Church, the family and the school. It will succeed in achieving its goals only if all these groups work together in a spirit of co-operation, respect each other's role rights and expertise and share the same goals.

No community is impervious to change. Shifts in demographics, beliefs, attitudes and practices can change the very nature of a community. A new pastoral reality requires a renewal of missionary focus. As per the instruction, this missionary focus represents a model of "Church which goes forth in dialogue with everyone . . . and at the same time we need the courage to bear witness to a Catholic culture, that is universal, cultivating a healthy awareness of our own Christian identity" (n. 72).

If properly addressed, Catholic schools can create a culture of dialogue which is meaningful and which responds to the split between faith and culture.

Animated by the spirit of the Gospel, Catholic schools must be places of welcome, hospitality and service, where the seminal truths and values of a Catholic worldview are celebrated and shared, and a spirit of genuine community is fostered. Most importantly however, they must be Christocentric in nature and purpose and derive their identity from the person of Jesus Christ. They exist in the hope that all members will have a personal encounter with Jesus and be empowered in their Christian witness and discipleship.

As affirmed by the Congregation for Catholic Education, this 'personal relationship with Christ enables the believer to look at the whole of reality in a radically new way' (n. 20).

4. A Religious Typology of Catholic School Students

By their very nature, large groups of people are heterogeneous and generally comprise of a number of sub-groups. This remains true even when the group has a targeted audience, such as a faith-based school, and the participants share a common sense of purpose. While having common experiences, the various sub-groups and individual participants tend to interpret and value them differently. This is true of Catholic schools, which tend to be diverse in nature.

The existence of sub-groups has significant implications for the mission, vision and values of Catholic schools, for schools' prioritization and understanding of Catholic identity and the teaching of Religious Education. Undertaking ethnographic research in three Catholic high schools in England, Casson (2012) identified eight different sub-groups or Catholic identities. Critically, it was found that religious socialization was a process, where a "student's views of their Catholic identity appeared to be varied, fluid and fragmentary".

In 2014, Sydney Catholic Schools introduced a *Survey of Religious Attitudes and Practices*. The survey involved students in Years 5, 7, 9 and 11. While school participation was optional, the survey was completed by students from 135 of the 147 systemic schools. Since then, the survey has been conducted on a biennial basis, and it has involved all systemic schools in the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney. This has enabled a longitudinal analysis of the research data.

The survey was developed to gain a deeper understanding of the 'religiosity' of young people in the Archdiocese of Sydney, and to inform approaches to, and models of, youth ministry and Religious Education. The survey includes 'like' questions to other empirical research with young people to enable comparisons between different population samples. The survey data (2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, 2024) showed that there were four main sub-groups in relation to religious attitudes and practices. The sub-groups are identified as: committed, involved, searching and disengaged.

4.1. Committed Students

Committed students demonstrated a high level of religiosity, marked by deep engagement with their faith through active participation in church life and regular worship. They prioritized personal prayer in their daily routines and felt comfortable discussing their beliefs with others. Their religious identity and commitment were further strengthened by peer support, which provided emotional stimulation and fulfilment, enhancing their sense of community and enriching their spiritual experiences. Committed students affirmed their support of Church teachings.

4.2. Involved Students

Students who actively engaged in their religious community demonstrated a strong appreciation for the significance of religion, emphasizing that an authentic expression of faith should be reflected in their Church participation. However, it is notable that their engagement did not consistently translate into regular religious practices, particularly in terms of Mass attendance. These students placed considerable value on personal prayer, indicating that their faith was primarily enacted through adherence to the teachings and exemplary life of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they exhibited confidence in discussing their faith with family and peers, and many articulated a desire to deepen their understanding of their religious beliefs (Cleary 2018).

4.3. Searching Students

Searching students were ad hoc in their religious practices, some integrating both communal worship and individual prayer into their routines, others not. As a collective,

they acknowledged the significance of religion, identifying it as a crucial source of personal meaning and a determinant of their everyday choices. These searching students recognized the necessity of respecting diverse religious beliefs and expressed a degree of comfort in adhering selectively to various religious teachings. Overall, they tended to prioritize personalized spirituality over strict adherence to a specific religious tradition, particularly emphasizing the enhancement of their relationship with the divine. Religion was viewed as important if it brought individuals a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

4.4. Disengaged Students

Disengaged students attributed little value to the importance of religion and this was reflected in their limited or no engagement in Church activities and having an absence of personal prayer in their daily lives. Those who acknowledged some value in religion typically distanced themselves from Mass attendance, viewing it as emblematic of 'institutional religion.' A notable segment of these disengaged students identified as atheist. Conversely, many individuals who professed belief in God displayed a lack of interest or commitment to religious tenets and practices. Some students did recognize social justice and outreach as a positive aspect of religious engagement. Disengaged students rarely or never spoke about religion with family and friends.

The profiles of the sub-groups provide general characteristics and should be considered accordingly. Individual student responses varied, meaning that the personal religiosity of some students did not always correspond with a single sub-group profile. Furthermore, each sub-group had sub-groups.

Analysis of the longitudinal survey data shows that students from Sydney Catholic Schools are drawn from across the religio-spiritual spectrum. The value of the data is multifaceted. Importantly, it not only points to the existence of various sub-groups, but it provides valuable insights into the worldviews of young people within those groups. This can enable a more intentional approach to the planning and teaching of Religious Education, both in content and pedagogy, so that it becomes a coherent and attractive source of influence, formation and socialization (Rymarz and Cleary 2017).

5. Restless Hearts

The Catholic Church teaches that "the desire for God is written in the human heart" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, n. 27) and this desire results in a restless searching for the transcendent. It is from this notion of searching that the human person is described as *homo viator*, a life-long pilgrim (John Paul II 1998, n.7). The quest for the transcendent is not unique to any one creed or Faith Tradition. Rather, it might be described as an innate human characteristic.

Successive popes have put forward the view that despite living in an era characterized by secularism, where "God seems to have disappeared from the horizon of some people or to have become a reality that meets with indifference" there is a "reawakening of the religious sense" (Benedict XVI 2011), and that this reawakening has resulted from the religiosity of the human person, and their 'restless heart' (St Augustine *Confessions*, 1). Pope Benedict XVI suggested the human person is not just *homo sapien* but is also *homo religiosus*, concerned with the existential questions in life, and longing for the transcendent.

The image of the human person as *homo religious* and *homo viator*, yearning for the transcendent may not always be how teachers perceive their students, especially given the social statistics that point to the decline of religion and a lessening of young peoples' belief in God. But despite this, it is clear that young people are searching for meaning in life, and often this search involves existential questioning Some young people find a sense of meaning through socialization, solidarity with others, or the achievement of a

personal milestone, whereas others identify 'epiphany moments' in which they have had the realization of the transcendent.

Catholic schools are in a unique and privileged position because they can seek out ways to provide an environment which is conducive to the promotion of religious plausibility, opportunities for religious socialization and to strengthen the religious commitment of young people (Cleary 2015). While drawing students from across the religio-spiritual spectrum, Catholic schools still typically attract students with a level of religiosity or openness to faith that differentiates them from many young people in the general population where lives and worldviews are far removed from the Christian Tradition. At the same time, these faith-based institutions are highly diverse.

Rymarz (2024) has argued that a coherent response to the changed cultural realties of Catholic schools and the wider society, is that Religious Education curriculums are academically robust and prioritize dialogue, student engagement and pedagogical methodology. In faith-based schools, even those which are highly diverse, an emphasis on the knowledge of one's own religious tradition, beliefs and practices strengthens religious plausibility and socialization and enables meaningful and genuine dialogue with people of other faiths (Griffiths 2001).

Catholic schools typically respond to the diversity of their communities through a common unifying goal: an interior journey of spiritual renewal centred on a search for meaning and an ultimate encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ. This ultimately, is the *raison d'etre* of Catholic schools. For this to be made possible, all young people are recognized as travellers, "thirsty for new horizons, hungry for justice and peace, searching for truth, longing for love, open to the absolute and the infinite" (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People 1998, p. 24).

6. Truth, Beauty and Goodness

At World Youth Day XXIII, Pope Benedict challenged young people, "do not be fooled by those who see you as just another consumer in a market of undifferentiated possibilities, where choice itself becomes the good, novelty usurps beauty, and subjective experience displaces truth" (Benedict XVI 2008a). He was aware that truth, beauty and goodness transcend time, place and points of difference. They are at the heart of what it means to be human, and innately we are each drawn to them and fulfilled by them. Properly understood, truth, beauty are not siloed. Rather, a correlation and unity exists between them. For example, experiences are not solely beautiful—they are equally true and good.

Truth, beauty and goodness are transcendentals because they point to the divine, and for people of faith, God is revealed through each and is considered the source of each. They "are things that all people value and . . . are avenues of encounter with created reality, with another, and with God" (Salkeld 2023, p. 248). They often act as provocations to enduring and existential questions and they can help nurture our desire for God. Truth, beauty and goodness are not solely divine attributes. Rather, they are central to our own humanity as well. Through them, people can appreciate that they are created in the image and likeness of God, and that "their truth, their beauty and their goodness all reflect the infinite perfection of God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, n. 41).

The appreciation of beauty is highly significant as a human experience. We often encounter phenomena that can be classified as beautiful—whether through an inspiring musical composition, a masterful piece of art, or the awe-inspiring aspects of the natural world. These encounters operate on various cognitive and emotional levels. For some individuals, there is a profound appreciation for human creativity and innovation. For others, certain experiences transcend conventional categories, eliciting a sense of the sublime that is genuinely breathtaking (Cleary 2022).

Each however has a common thread: it makes us feel good; it uplifts our spirits and awakens within us an appreciation of what is good, true and beautiful. These moments appeal to our esthetic sense. Despite our differences we yearn for this sense to be stimulated and fulfilled. The appreciation of beauty is not determined by the postcode of one's residence or one's social, religious, or cultural background. It is deeply innate to the human person.

Human flourishing is not accidental. Rather, it must be nurtured through a consciousness that we were made for higher things. Beauty is central to this, for it ennobles us and brings meaning and profound joy to our lives. This approach is not something new for the church, because throughout her history, art, music and literature have been central to both catechesis and evangelization. St Pope John Paul II (1999, n. 10) reflected, that "true art has an affinity with faith . . . and remains a kind of bridge to religious experience". The search for what is true, good and beautiful, and the contemplation of these things has inspired believers in every generation. Ultimately, we know too, that despite a myriad of societal changes, today's younger generations are no different.

7. The Liberal Arts

The search for what is true, good and beautiful is typically borne out in the Liberal Arts approach to education. Through the Liberal Arts students learn how to responsibly exercise personal freedom for the betterment of self and others, how to contribute to society, and how to develop their capacity for critical thinking and moral reasoning. They experience an integral development of their humanness, where they flourish as virtuous and articulate individuals, and in which all facets of the human personality are drawn out.

The Liberal Arts is a highly effective way of engaging with educational communities that are diverse in nature because the approach serves to develop and nurture individual personalities, affirming their universal rights and acknowledging those of others, to fully, actively and meaningfully participate in and contribute to our society. In a very real way, the Liberal Arts reflect the etymological roots of education, which comes from the Latin e-ducere, meaning 'to lead or draw out.' The Liberal Arts is 'freeing' in nature, because it offers an education which will draw out people's inherent talents and capacities, so that they might have life and have it to the full.

Traditionally, the Liberal Arts were a way of education that had its roots in Greek civilisation and philosophy, which were then built upon by great Christian thinkers like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. The fruits of this classical approach to learning can be seen in great literature, philosophy, music, art, science and other areas of human endeavour. This classical approach to education remains highly relevant today. This is evidenced in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Education Council 2019) which highlights the importance of a wholistic education which prioritizes young peoples intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and esthetic development and wellbeing.

Through the Liberal Arts, students can not only excel academically, but also develop a profound connection with the enduring legacy of human thought. Through this approach, students

- seek truth,
- find and apply wisdom,
- strive for excellence, and
- discover virtue, wisdom and joy.

The Liberal Arts awaken within students an appreciation of and desire for what is good, true and beautiful, and an understanding of the interrelationship between them. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reflected, "proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something

beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties. Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus" (Francis 2013, n. 167).

While Catholic schools are generally pluralistic in nature themselves, the Liberal Arts pedagogies and content have an explicitly religious emphasis. Through them, students learn about the Catholic Tradition, and the place of the Church in a modern pluralistic society. Students come to value and appreciate the nature of Divine Revelation and the role of faith and reason in the Catholic Tradition and the lives of Catholics. The religious identity of Catholic schools is not compromised or diluted or presented with ambiguity. Nor is it presented with triumphalism. Rather, the religious identity of Catholic schools is informed by dialogue that promotes universal truths, the common good and mutual respect.

The Liberal Arts are not utilitarian or transactional in nature. They are directed towards both individual and social ends, with a core goal of nurturing within students, virtues and good habits in order to contribute to the common good. They recognize that if a young person acquires knowledge, but not the capacity for moral reasoning, they are diminished personally. To this end, an explicit intention of Liberal Arts pedagogies is the nurturing of the intellectual, emotional, social, moral and spiritual capacities of each student. In saying this, the Liberal Arts do not assume that all students have the same interest s, talents and abilities. Rather, they are differentiated in their content and delivery, so as to address the diversity of student needs and to draw out their uniquely inherent talents and capacities. The approach is inspired by the assurance of Jesus, *'I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full'* (John 10:10).

8. Integrating the Liberal Arts into Religious Education

In 2018, the NSW Educational Standards Authority (NESA 2018), endorsed *Studies in Catholic Thought* as a Content Endorsed Course for students in Years 11 and 12 in Catholic schools across NSW. The course introduces students to the theological, historical, religious, ethical and philosophical aspects of the Catholic Tradition. While the course specifically deepens students' awareness and appreciation of the depth and breadth of the Catholic Tradition, and the richness of its patrimony, it has been well received by students from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds. This is important because the cultivation of human values sits at the heart of Catholic education and the "teaching of the Catholic religion is called to develop the disposition for a respectful and open dialogue" (Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation 2020, n. 315).

Both students and teachers have affirmed the robust nature of the course, the intensive study of the Catholic Tradition—its historical foundations and development, and the explicit connections between faith and life. The course is viewed as stimulating and challenging as it integrates a range of academic disciplines. While the acquisition of knowledge, especially that of Scripture and Tradition, is central to *Studies in Catholic Thought*, the programme also promotes a love of learning, and the nurturing of students' critical capacity to make decisions on the basis of sound reasoning. They learn how to responsibly exercise personal freedom for the betterment of self and others and how to function and contribute to society.

Following the successful introduction of *Studies in Catholic Thought* in 2018, the Mission and Identity directorate of Sydney Catholic Schools began a process of embedding Liberal Arts pedagogies and content into the Years 3-10 Religious Education curriculum. Through their study of Religious Education, students were provided with opportunities to explore theology, philosophy, ethics, history, art, architecture, music and poetry. This diversification of the curriculum has enriched teaching and learning programmes considerably and has stimulated students' sense of Catholic imagination.

The integration of the Liberal Arts into Religious Education was implemented systematically, driven primarily through teacher professional development. The K-10 Religious Education curriculum of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney has a five-strand structure:

Strand A: Scripture and Jesus
Strand B: Church and Community
Strand C: God, Religion and Life
Strand D: Prayer, Liturgy and Sacraments
Strand E: Morality and Justice

For each year/grade level, each strand has explicit objectives, outcomes, compulsory scripture, statements of learning and essential questions. Each strand also has the same number of indicative teaching and learning hours. The scope and sequence of teaching and learning units has been designed from the perspective of a matrix model. That is, teachers will integrate content and resources vertically within a stand across a range of year levels, and horizontally into the other strands at the same year level. This has been done to great effect.

The integration of the Liberal Arts into Religious Education is a collaborative project between the Mission and Identity directorate of Sydney Catholic Schools and classroom teachers of Religious Education. Its starting point has been a 'teach the teacher' model to develop people's awareness of Liberal Arts content and pedagogies, and where possible identify Liberal Arts animators or champions across the 147 schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney. This has been actively supported by critical external friends with expertise in the field, including the academic staff of Campion College, a Liberal Arts College, and Dr Peter Mudge.

The professional development experiences have focused on an individual strand of the Religious Education curriculum each day. They are highly practical in nature and involve the sharing of resources and teaching strategies for individual units, as well as explicit connections to other units through the use a matrix model. The professional learning experiences model Liberal Arts pedagogies, e.g., Socratic dialogue (Clark and Jain 2016), the place of enduring and existential questions (D'Souza 2016) and the explicit use and integration of the transcendentals: truth, beauty and goodness (Caldecott 2009). The approach is designed so that teachers continue to work together as professional learning communities after strand days and use the Liberal Arts to develop and modify their Religious Education programmes as they are trialled 'in situ'. In their evaluations, teachers have validated the approach as being highly effective.

Dr. Peter Mudge supported the Liberal Arts integration with teachers of Years 9 and 10 Religious Education. He used the metaphor of a planet and its six moons to describe Liberal Arts examples that should be chosen (Mudge 2024). According to Mudge, each unit should have a foundational stimulus which relates to other Liberal Arts examples from a range of disciplines, including: Scripture, Creation, Art & Film, History, Architecture, Classical Writing, Sacred Music, and Philosophy and Theology. Importantly, the treatment of these works should not be cursory or shallow but enable students to explore their interrelated nature. Mudge asserts that examples should be chosen which will be of interest to students, not too 'cerebral' in nature and which are open to layers of interpretation. By using this selection criteria, teaching and learning resources will have a broad-based appeal to a diverse range of students.

Truth, Beauty and Goodness were the pillars upon which Liberal Arts pedagogies and content were integrated within the Religious Education curriculum. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlighted the value of the 'way of beauty' (via *pulchritudinis*), not as "fostering an esthetic relativism which would downplay the inseparable bond between

truth, goodness and beauty, but rather a renewed esteem for beauty as a means of touching the human heart"(n. 167).

The 'way of beauty' has become the principal driver of the Liberal Arts in Religious Education. This has been intentional. Truth and goodness are often contested, and given our highly secularized and relativistic culture, they "have a diminished ability to move minds and hearts. But the via *pulchritudinis* still has the power to capture the imagination and win souls" (Conley 2024). The experience of beauty is transformative, for it evokes within us a sense of wonder and awe and deepens our capacity for contemplation and reflection. It is transcendent in nature for it points beyond itself: "beauty, kind of a mirror to the divine, vivifies young hearts and minds" (Benedict XVI 2007).

9. Conclusions

The social and cultural milieu of Western nations poses significant challenges to the mission and conduct of faith-based schools. It is within this culture that a great number of people develop a personal spirituality which rarely draws upon religious traditions. It is a spirituality which can be described as secular, individualistic, subjective and self-reliant.

Catholic schools are distinguished by their religious dimension, characterized by the transmission of faith, the interrelationship between faith and culture, and an atmosphere that promotes the authentic development of the whole person. Central to this development is the priority given to religious instruction, enabling young people to know, understand, celebrate and live-out their faith (Cleary 2015). In Australia and New Zealand, Catholic schools tend to be diverse, drawing upon students from a range of Religious Traditions and from across the religio-spiritual spectrum. As has been the case, this diversity need not be an impediment to the success of Catholic education. For the greater part, Catholic schools are pluralistic in nature and offer an education where "interreligious encounter is unavoidable" (Congregation for Catholic Education 2013, n. 55). In these contexts, there is an openness to plurality and difference, and an integral and respectful humanism is developed. This promotes tolerance and solidarity and helps foster the personal and spiritual growth of each person.

This positive milieu can be in part attributed to the search for truth, beauty and goodness promoted through the integration of the Liberal Arts in Religious Education. Insights from the Liberal Arts can help students "to read insightfully, think rigorously, and speak articulately . . . and bring creativity, beauty and well-reasoned ideas into the world" (Mudge 2024). They have stimulated the imagination and our sense of wonder and awe, nurtured a sense of empathy and inspired curiosity. They have helped us explore the great and enduring questions about life and death, the nature of suffering, belief in God and our personal search for meaning. Ultimately, they have been our dialogue with the divine. A dialogue with the divine is not restricted to one religious group or another. Rather, it is an innately human characteristic. This 'hungering for God' was a key message of Pope Benedict XVI at World Youth Day in Sydney. He said,

> There are times when we might be tempted to seek a certain fulfilment apart from God . . . but where does this lead? . . . God is with us in the reality of life, not the fantasy! It is embrace, not escape, we seek! (Benedict XVI 2008b)

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