Article

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 research-led and utilises educational, standards-based principles. It is a community-minded approach that aims to build religious literacy and deepen the religious educators’ awareness and connections to the legacy 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 reformative 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.
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 (Isaiah 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 scope 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).
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

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**Figure 2.** Guiding questions for interrogating Catholic content.
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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