

Article

An Empirical Study of the Problem of 'Ecclesiastical Drift' in Catholic School Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

Just when Catholic school Religious Education (RE) needs to be more outwardly focused on the contemporary search for meaning, its discourse has 'drifted' almost so exclusively into ecclesiastical terminology that its value as a spiritual/moral subject is being eroded –creating an ever widening discontinuity with classroom realities and young people's spirituality. Religious educators' perceptions of this problem, labelled as 'ecclesiastical drift', were investigated. While *ecclesiastical terms* were respected, issues related to their excessive usage were identified. By contrast, the unanimous, positive endorsement of *educational terms* raises the question why such language is largely missing from many Catholic accounts of RE.

KEYWORDS: Religious Education; Catholic schools; Catholic education; ecclesiastical drift

Background to the study

It has almost become something of a cliché to say that we live in times of unprecedented change that make it difficult for young people to find meaning and purpose in life; and to propose that school education might be able to make some contribution to help them in this quest. Scholars, psychologists and educators have been saying this for the past 60 years (Postman and Weingartner 1969; Birch 1975); and during this whole period, what they said was always true. Part of the problem today is that new, challenging issues are continually emerging at a faster rate than ever.

Philip Phenix's (1964) book *Realms of meaning* started the ever growing movement concerned with how school education might help young people in their search for meaning in times of rapid social change. Today, in globalised, digital, secularised culture, the importance and urgency of this role have never been greater; cultural change has accelerated exponentially, and, for many, traditional religious sources of meaning are no longer prominent or plausible reference points. Despite the high level of secularisation of young people, even in church-related schools, RE can make a valuable contribution to their spiritual/moral education, no matter what their level of religious affiliation or practice.

RE, with core curriculum status in Catholic schools, has both the credentials and precedents for studying directly the contemporary human quest for meaning to help resource the spirituality of young people, whether they are religious or not. This means broadening the scope of its content beyond Catholicism to include study of other religions and of the ways in which culture influences spirituality. In Australia in the 1970s, some Catholic schools set out to do this in their senior school religion programs. At that time in an era when School Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) was at its zenith, they were free to implement their own courses without ecclesiastical oversight – a situation which changed when Catholic diocesan authorities and bishops took more control with centralised religion curricula made up mainly of Catholic content. But with the widespread acceptance of state-based religion studies programs in senior classes, there is current acceptance that the content for RE at this level does not have to be exclusively Catholic.

My conclusion: Catholic RE, especially for senior classes, needs to give more attention to a critical pedagogy with contemporary issue-related content that investigates the shaping influence of culture on people's beliefs, values and lifestyle. The Australian philosopher of education Brian Hill (2006) summarised this approach in two brief phrases: "the mission of [religious] education is to *resource the choosing self*" and "to help students *interrogate their cultural conditioning*". This approach is explained in more detail in Rossiter (2018).

The central question being addressed here is that just at the very time when there is an urgent need for an *outward-looking*, issue-addressing approach in Catholic school RE, it has turned *inwards*, with excessive attention focused on Catholic identity, faith formation, new evangelisation and church mission. This empirical study investigates educators' perception of the problem.

Problems with the discourse of Catholic Religious Education in schools

The *discourse* of RE is made up of the words and ideas used by educators to articulate underlying assumptions, purposes and practices, and for the evaluation and development of the discipline. A synonym for the discourse is the *narrative* for RE where the connotation refers to the 'story line' that is used to give an account of RE, its history and progress, how it is understood today and how it might change and develop in the future.

The words used by educators when talking about RE are important because they frame the aims, content and pedagogy. In 1985, Crawford and Rossiter argued that there was a need to evaluate the language of Catholic RE because the multiplicity of ecclesiastical terms being used was confusing for teachers, students and parents; it tended to create ambiguity and distract from the task of articulating a meaningful and relevant RE for contemporary youth. This task is even more critical now than it was then.

The language of Religious Education structures the discussion of the subject. In effect, it determines many of the possibilities that will emerge; it has a formative influence on teachers' expectations and on what and how they teach; it influences presumptions about the types of responses they will seek from students; it provides criteria for judging what has been achieved; it influences teachers' perception and interpretation of problems in religious education; it even influences the way teachers feel about their work – "Am I a success or a failure?" This language can be oppressive if it restricts religion teachers to limited or unrealistic ways of thinking and talking about their work (Crawford and Rossiter 1985, 33).

In 1970, in the article *Catechetics RIP*, US scholar Gabriel Moran was one of the first to comment on an emerging problem within the language of Catholic RE. Where idiosyncratic, ecclesiastical terms were used exclusively, the discourse became 'in house' and relatively closed to outside ideas and debate. Ever since then, Moran in particular, and other scholars have persistently sought to clarify the language of Religious Education (Moran 1980, 1998; DiGiacomo 1984). Since 1981, publications by Crawford and Rossiter collectively (1981, 1985, 2006, 2018) have drawn attention to various aspects of this problem, as well as to the way that devotional and emotional titles, and presumptive language had negative effects on religion curricula and teaching.

More recently, Rossiter (2020) explained the problem labelled as 'ecclesiastical drift'. It is said to occur where the discourse about the purposes and practices of RE has gradually and incrementally come to be dominated almost exclusively by constructs like faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, new evangelisation and Catholic mission. There is evidence (in diocesan and school documents/websites and in the re-naming of former diocesan RE departments, as well as in new religious leadership roles in Catholic schools) that these ecclesiastical words have been replacing the term Religious Education. I consider that ecclesiastical drift is *the* major ongoing problem for the future of Australian Catholic Religious Education. Only some conclusions from that study are noted here.

- Excessive ecclesiastical language, at the expense of the word education, makes RE *too Catholic centric*, at the very time when it should be looking *outwards* on the shaping influence of culture. Adding more of this dimension does not compromise attention given to the Catholic religious tradition.
- Ecclesiastical language dominance eclipses the educational dimension to RE and what suffers is thinking about what it means to *educate* today’s young people spiritually and religiously.
- If students, teachers and parents are inclined to see RE as an *ecclesiastical* rather than as an *educational* activity, then increasingly they are less likely to see it as it is a meaningful part of school education.
- Special attention given to Catholic identity gives the impression of exclusiveness that can make the 30% of students who are not Catholic, as well as the non-religious Catholic students, and non-Catholic and non-religious teachers, feel uncomfortable and perhaps marginalised.

The survey and respondents

A 53 item, 5 point Likert scale questionnaire was developed, with questions in the following areas:- Ecclesiastical terms (11 items); Educational terms (11); Short narratives for Religious Education (5); Problem usage of ecclesiastical terms (11); Faith formation (5); Catholic identity (8); Need for a critical evaluative approach in RE (3). 6 scales were developed covering these areas, each with a range of 20-100, where the score 60 was the midpoint.

The survey was uploaded to the online platform *Survey Monkey*. Religion teachers who were in recent postgraduate courses taught by the researcher, together with some colleagues in universities and diocesan offices, along with some overseas colleagues, were invited to trial the questionnaire. As this was a limited private investigation, formal ethics approval from institutions was not sought. There were 74 responses. The results were processed in SPSS. This article is drawn from the complete research report available at <https://asmre.org/survey.html> The limitation of article length meant that not all of the data or detailed discussion of results could be included here.

Participants: There were 47 respondents from across 8 of the 28 Australian Catholic dioceses. These 8 dioceses were all on the East coast of the country. 27 respondents were from overseas (USA 10; UK 2; New Zealand 8; South Africa 1; Germany 2; Netherlands1; Hong Kong1; Nigeria 1; Croatia 1.) The overseas contingent might provide a pointer as to whether ecclesiastical drift is an idiosyncratically Australian problem or whether it also occurs in different contexts in other countries.

Role: 55% were currently RE teachers while 45% were diocesan consultants/advisers or RE academics. 59% identified mainly with secondary RE with 31% with RE in primary school. 65 respondents indicated that they had formal qualifications in Religious Education/Theology.

Gender: 54% indicated female and 42% indicated male.

Results

1. Key words, constructs and ideas for describing purposes and practices – both ecclesiastical and educational

On a 5 point scale (1 Strongly disagree through to 5 Strongly agree), respondents indicated how appropriate and relevant they considered various *ecclesiastical* and *educational* terms were for giving an account of RE for today’s Catholic school students. For each item the total % in agreement, the mean and the rank (from highest to lowest means) are presented.

Table 1. Valuation of ecclesiastical and educational terms in the narrative for Religious Education

Ecclesiastical / church terms	Total % in agreement	Mean Score	Rank
Catholic identity	64%	3.66	1
Christian outreach	66%	3.64	2
Christian witness and sharing personal faith	61%	3.59	3
Faith development	65%	3.55	4
Faith formation	59%	3.47	5
Ministry	60%	3.43	6
Catholic church mission	58%	3.30	7
Evangelisation	45%	3.05	8
Christian doctrine	50%	3.01	9
Catechesis	28%	2.50	10
Sunday Mass attendance	22%	2.41	11

Generic educational terms	Total % in agreement	Mean Score	Rank
Critical thinking about religion	89%	4.39	1
Study of contemporary spiritual/moral issues	91%	4.35	2
Resourcing young people's spirituality whether they are religious or not	88%	4.31	3
A credible academic subject with the same study demands as regular subjects	86%	4.27	4
Study of the contemporary search for meaning	80%	4.24	5
Important for the spiritual/moral education of young Australian citizens	84%	4.23	6
Knowledge and understanding of Catholicism	85%	4.18	7
Religious literacy	78%	4.05	8
Some study of other religions represented in Australian society	75%	3.99	9
Skills in interpreting the shaping influence of culture on people	70%	3.95	10
Important as the only spiritual/moral subject in the curriculum	53%	3.46	11

Catholic identity and Christian outreach had the highest mean scores for the ecclesiastical terms – with catechesis and Sunday Mass attendance having the lowest. One ecclesiastical item was ambiguous because it conflated ‘Christian witnessing’ with ‘personal faith sharing’ – they are not necessarily the same or related. But nevertheless it ranked third highest.

Critical thinking about religion and the study of contemporary spiritual/moral issues had the highest means for the generic educational terms – with the lowest being the importance of RE as the only spiritual/moral subject in the school curriculum.

The level of agreement about the appropriateness and relevance of the educational terms was significantly higher than that for the ecclesiastical terms. All of the educational terms, with one exception had higher means than all of the ecclesiastical terms. The dispersion/variance in responses was greater for the ecclesiastical terms where the average standard deviation for items was 1.26, whereas the average standard deviation for the educational terms was 0.92. This finding was mirrored in two new scales which gave an aggregated measure of the level of positive valuation for each group. The *ecclesiastical terms scale* with a mean of 64/100 showed that 68% of participants scored above the mid point,

with a large standard deviation of 17.5. By contrast, the *educational terms scale* had a mean of 82/100 and 99% of respondents were above the mid point, with a lower standard deviation of 11. The educational terms were valued highly, with little if any dissent about their relevance for religious education; whereas there was a significant minority who perceived problems with the ecclesiastical terms.

2. Narratives or scenarios for Religious Education

This section reports participants' valuation of how appropriate and relevant were each of 5 short narratives/scenarios giving an account of Religious Education. The narratives were not exclusive.

Narrative 1. The principal purpose of Catholic schools and Religious Education is to participate in the mission of the Catholic Church. Catholic schools are founded on the person of Jesus Christ and are centres of the new evangelisation. Religious education should imbue young people with a Catholic identity. It should develop their religious faith and deepen their personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ. In RE, students and teachers can share their personal faith. RE should enhance their religious practice and their engagement with the church – especially Sunday Mass.	Total % in agreement	46%
	Mean score	3.09
	Rank	5
Narrative 2 Religious education should enhance young people's religious literacy. This includes especially knowledge and understanding of Catholicism, its theology, scripture, traditions and religious practices. It should develop critical thinking about religion and religious issues. It will include evaluations from a Catholic perspective.	Total % in agreement	83%
	Mean score	4.08
	Rank	3
Narrative 3 Young people are confronted by the complexities, dilemmas and conflicting interpretations of life's meaning and purpose. They require, more than ever, the skill of critical thinking in order to navigate an uncertain and pluralistic world. As there is no final answer to life's ultimate meaning and purpose in which intellectual certainty is possible, human knowledge is always partial and limited. Consequently, students are invited to explore within Religious Education the inexhaustible mystery of human existence, as glimpsed primarily through the lens of the Catholic Christian Tradition, as well as other religious traditions and help render this mystery meaningful in their lives.	Total % in agreement	87%
	Mean score	4.23
	Rank	2
Narrative 4 In giving young people access to their religious heritage, Religious Education can enhance their knowledge and understanding of Catholic theology, Scripture and religious traditions. It should also give some attention to other religious traditions represented in Australia. In addition, it should help develop students' skills for analysing, interpreting and evaluating contemporary spiritual/moral issues, including scrutiny of the shaping influence that culture can have on people's thinking and on their values and lifestyle. In times of rapid social and	Total % in agreement	89%
	Mean score	4.36
	Rank	1

cultural change, and even more so during a global pandemic, the presumptions people make about 'the good life' can appear shaky and contingent, creating uncertainty and anxiety about the future. RE is the subject that could give attention to the ways people are trying to find meaning and make sense of life in difficult times. And it can give students the opportunity to engage in some research on these questions.	
Narrative 5 Both philosophically and historically, Religious Education has been the most distinctively Catholic religious aspect of Catholic schooling in Australia. It testifies to the core principle that any school curriculum is deficient if it does not have a spiritual/moral subject like religion, ethics, philosophy, or personal development etc. RE, through educating young people in their own religious tradition, as well as some study of religion generally and of the contemporary search for meaning, makes a valuable contribution to the education of young Australians and enhances the nation's educational, social capital and contributes to the common good. In this way, Catholic schools could exercise a national leadership role as regards the importance of a spiritual/moral dimension to the Australian school curriculum.	Total % in agreement
	65%
	Mean score 3.79 Rank 4

Narrative 4 rated the highest of the five. Narrative 3, which was extracted from the introduction to the Brisbane Catholic Education Office (2019) course *Religion, Meaning and Life* rated second highest. The narrative made up mainly of ecclesiastical terms rated the lowest of the five, with less than 50% agreeing that it was appropriate and relevant.

3. Use of ecclesiastical language in the narrative for RE and indication of whether the problem of ecclesiastical drift is identified.

Table 2 Perceptions of potential problems with the use of ecclesiastical terms in RE

Questionnaire items	Total % in agreement	Mean Score	Rank
What is needed in the discourse of RE is a balanced use of ecclesiastical terms along with educational terms.	77%	4.14	1
Ecclesiastical language (especially terms like faith formation and Catholic identity) is very prominent in the discourse of Catholic religious education.	73%	3.85	2
Ecclesiastical language tends to predominate in professional development programs offered to new and continuing religion teachers.	69%	3.75	3
I am aware of new religious leadership positions in Catholic schools and diocesan offices where the position names are worded with the ecclesiastical terms noted above.	60%	3.65	4
Frequent use of ecclesiastical language for RE can make students, parents and teachers think of it more as like a church activity rather than a school/educational one.	56%	3.61	5
Ecclesiastical expectations of Catholic RE and church terms are acceptable – but the problem is where they dominate the language of RE.	53%	3.56	6

Ecclesiastical language creates ambiguity and some confusion of purposes about Religious Education because it seems to have displaced educational words.	53%	3.48	7
Frequent use of Catholic ecclesiastical language for RE inhibits its capacity to contribute to the national education discourse about the importance of a spiritual/moral dimension to the school curriculum.	48%	3.41	8
The ecclesiastical names of the new leadership positions create some ambiguity about the nature and role of RE in the school.	38%	3.35	9
Frequent use of ecclesiastical language for RE can give the impression that it is mainly about recruiting young people to Catholic church parishes.	49%	3.16	10
This ecclesiastical language helps teachers get a better understanding of religious education and clarity about its nature and purposes.	39%	3.03	11

The most highly rated item by far (mean score 4.14) was about the need for balanced use of both ecclesiastical and educational terms for articulating the purposes and practices of RE.

The ecclesiastical drift' scale measured perceptions of problems with the use of ecclesiastical language. Higher scores indicated recognition of the problem and lower scores that this was not so. The mean was 66 and 65% of respondents were above the halfway point with 15% in the 84-100 range. Notwithstanding the respect shown for ecclesiastical terminology, this data identified a significant level of participant concern about its excessive usage.

4. Use of the term faith formation in the language of RE

Table 3. Valuation of use of the term faith formation in RE

Questionnaire items	Total % in agreement	Mean Score	Rank
Faith formation is not just about 'educating' students but about 'changing' them at a personal and spiritual level.	62%	3.55	1
The term makes unrealistic presumptions about both the faith of students and about RE changing their personal faith.	51%	3.41	2
The etymology of the word 'formation', from seminaries and religious order novitiates at an earlier time (e.g. moulding, conforming, uniformity etc.), makes it a questionable term to use in association with a Christian understanding of faith	40%	3.15	3
The meaning of the term, faith formation is clear and unambiguous.	48%	3.09	4
Any observer could readily see the difference between a faith formation activity and an educational one.	43%	2.99	5

The highest rating item saw faith formation as changing students at a personal and spiritual level, and not just about educating them. But 51% of participants considered that the term makes unrealistic presumptions about students' faith and changing that faith. For the lowest scoring item, 35% disagreed that one could readily identify a faith formation activity as different from an educational one – a high proportion (28%) were not sure. Only 48% agreed that the term had clear and unambiguous meaning. The new faith formation valuation scale had a mean of 58 with 43% above the

midpoint. The data showed positive valuation of the term faith formation while also indicating that there were educators who considered its usage problematic.

5. Use of the term Catholic identity in the language of RE

Table 4. Valuation of use of the term Catholic identity in RE

Questionnaire items	Total % in agreement	Mean Score	Rank
Catholic identity is about 'recontextualising' the Catholic school – that is critical dialogue with culture towards a renewed Christian theological presence in the community.	51%	3.56	1
Frequent use of the term would inevitably make students and teachers who were not Catholic feel somewhat uncomfortable.	44%	3.35	2
Frequent use of the term would inevitably make relatively non-religious Catholic students and teachers feel somewhat uncomfortable.	43%	3.32	3
The term seems to be 'inward-looking' at the Catholic church at the very time when RE needs to be more 'outwards-oriented' – as in critical evaluation of culture.	44%	3.21	4
The meaning of the term, Catholic identity is clear and unambiguous.	40%	2.94	5
The term feels like it is a Catholic slogan – E.g. 'Make the Catholic church great again'.	34%	2.93	6
The first thing that comes to mind when I see the term Catholic identity is recontextualising the Catholic school.	33%	2.77	7
The term gives the impression that RE should be concerned with getting more students back to regular weekly mass attendance	32%	2.69	8

The highest rating item identified Lieven Boeve's (2007, 2016)'recontextualising agenda' as the core of Catholic identity. But only 51% agreed with 32% not sure. Respondents showed awareness of the problems the term creates for teachers/students who are not Catholic, and for the relatively non-religious Catholics (44% agreed with 26% not sure). 48 % indicated that the meaning of the term was not clear and unambiguous, while 40% considered that it was. The Catholic identity valuation scale had a mean of 50 with 27% above the midway point of 60.

6. The need for giving more curriculum space to study of the search for meaning and the critical evaluation of culture (especially in the senior classes)

Table 5 The need for a critical, evaluative pedagogy and issues-related content

Questionnaire items	Total % in agreement	Mean Score	Rank
62. Having more critical evaluation of culture and contemporary issues would make RE more relevant to the lives of students	79%	4.34	1

60. The approach in Scenario 4 above affirms commitment to teaching about Catholicism while allowing more scope for the critical evaluation of culture and contemporary issues.	80%	4.03	2
61. Because Catholic school Y11-12 students can already study state ATAR courses like <i>Studies of Religion</i> and <i>Religion and Society</i> , and non-ATAR <i>Religion and ethics</i> , it is acceptable to have 'other-than-Catholic' content in RE programs at this level.	64%	3.84	3

The critical evaluation of culture scale had a mean of 77 with 88% above the midpoint. This indicated strong support for giving more attention to this aspect in the narrative for RE and in the religion curriculum.

7. Higher order statistical analysis

Independent sample t tests were performed for some variables to see whether there were any statistically significant differences between the means for different groups of participants on particular items.

Did current religion teachers respond differently from academics/RE consultants & advisers?

The patterns of response of the two groups were not statistically different except in 11 of the 54 items. In 10 of these cases, the teachers had *higher* means.

Were there differences between the responses of overseas participants compared with Australians?

There were only 3 items where there were detectable statistical differences. In these 3, the Australian means were all higher. The differences are readily explained by overseas unfamiliarity with distinctive aspects of the Australian Catholic school context. This finding is a significant indicator that the problem of Catholic ecclesiastical drift is not an exclusively Australian one.

Were there differences in responses according to gender?

Patterns of response from females and males were statistically the same with 5 exceptions. In all these cases the female means were higher and in all instances were related to valuations of ecclesiastical terms.

Were there differences in responses from those whose teaching experience was mainly at primary or secondary school levels?

There were statistically significant differences in only 7 of the 54 items. And in all seven, the primary background respondents had lower means than did those with secondary background. And all of the items in question were about educational terms – specifically the level of critical, evaluative pedagogy.

Discussion

The group of 74 respondents in the trial was not large enough to claim that the findings reliably represented the views of the population of Australian Catholic school religious educators. However, it was large enough and diverse enough to show ‘pointers’ as to what a more extensive use of the questionnaire might show, as well as identifying key issues that need further research scrutiny and debate.

While participants in the trial were either former postgraduate students or colleagues from Australia and overseas, this was not considered a biased sample. There is no reason to think that they had any sort of ideological allegiance to the researcher’s professional view of religious education.

The use of ecclesiastical and educational terms in the narrative/discourse for Catholic school RE

The data showed a general acceptance of both ecclesiastical and educational terms for articulating the purposes and practices of RE. But the means for the ecclesiastical items were invariably and noticeably lower than those for educational terms. There is a network of factors that helps explain this result including:-

- Specific relationship with classroom teaching and learning: The links between educational terms and classroom practice are naturally clearer and more direct than those for ecclesiastical terms.
- Wide scope of ecclesiastical terms: The wide generic purposes of the ecclesiastical terms need to be qualified when applied to classroom RE. Some ecclesiastical terms are not so pertinent to classroom RE — E.g. the lowest ranking ecclesiastical item – mass attendance as a measure of the relationship between RE and church engagement.
- The problem of ecclesiastical drift: The participants, either explicitly or implicitly, to varying degrees, have experienced the problems ascribed to ecclesiastical drift, even though there remains a divergence in opinions.

If this questionnaire had been given to religion teachers in the 1960s and 1970s, no doubt *catechesis*, *Christian doctrine* and *ministry* would have rated more highly. Similarly, there was a time when *evangelisation* would have superseded *Catholic identity* in prominence. Things change. And the pattern of key word usage in RE continually evolves. I believe that we are currently at an important crossroads as regards finding a balance between ecclesiastical and educational perspectives.

Given the extensive Australian Catholic interest and engagement in the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2012), the highest rating for the term *Catholic identity* in section 1 was to be expected. While I anticipated that *Catholic identity* and *faith formation* would be the most prized of the ecclesiastical terms, I was surprised and puzzled by the prominence of *Christian outreach* with the second highest rank. I would have regarded this more as an extra-curricular or co-curricular component of the Catholic school's overall religious dimension, rather than as a part of classroom RE.

The narratives for Religious Education

The scenarios in section 2 provided a better window into the thinking of participants, compared with the approach in other sections, because they showed how the various terms might figure in narrative accounts of RE.

Narrative 1 included all the ecclesiastical terms. This may well have been perceived as both somewhat excessive and not fair because it could have made the scenario look unrealistic. This may have contributed to this item's low rating – it had the lowest rating of the five. But it did show a level of educators' aversion to a narrative dominated by such terminology, especially by contrast with the high level of satisfaction shown for the educational narratives.

Narrative 4 was the most highly rated. It would be interesting in any further research to explore what elements in this narrative were the most important ones for religion teachers. For example: was it the idea of 'resourcing the spirituality of young people no matter what their level of religious identification and practice' or was it perceived as a comprehensive and balanced account of a number of valued elements.

The data in Section 2 exemplified the strong unanimity of educators in endorsing the relevance and utility of educational terms and constructs in framing a narrative for school RE. If such a view is more widespread across the whole population of religion teachers, then this raises two important questions:

- Why is such language noticeably missing in diocesan and school accounts of RE?
- Why is the ecclesiastical language of narrative one so ubiquitous in these accounts?

Acknowledgment of the existence of the problem of ecclesiastical drift in Catholic RE

In section 3, only 39% considered that ecclesiastical language helped teachers get a better understanding of RE and clarity about its purposes, with 22% not sure and 34% disagreeing. 53% (with 27% unsure) judged that it was not so much the ecclesiastical terms themselves that were the problem – rather it was their dominance of the narrative of RE that was the issue. 53% also considered that this usage created ambiguity about the purposes of RE because it tended to displace or marginalise educational terms.

The most direct indicator of awareness of the problem was the *ecclesiastical drift scale* which measured the level of recognition that excessive use of ecclesiastical terms was causing difficulties for RE. 65% of participants were above the half way score of 60, with the mean being 66. The standard deviation of 20 suggested that there was a notable level of divergent opinion about whether or not ecclesiastical drift was an issue of concern.

It is significant that the most highly rated item in section 3 was about the need for *balanced use* of both ecclesiastical and educational terms for describing RE. My reading of this result, in the light of the responses across this section, suggests that there is currently a recognised lack of balance that is problematical. In my opinion, this is sufficient evidence to warrant further consideration of the issue and remedial action.

Evaluation of use of the term faith formation

The highest ranking item in section 4 affirmed that faith formation was more about ‘changing’ students at personal and spiritual levels than it was about ‘educating’ them (Mean 3.6 with 62% in agreement). This view of faith formation always appears to be the *subtext* when used in many current Catholic RE documents and publications; the other associated subtext that often seems to be there is *improving young people’s engagement with the church*. For me, the result for this item was the most disturbing finding of the trial.

I consider that the term faith formation is flawed and problematical because it tends to make unquestioned, unrealistic assumptions about the nature of personal faith in God, how this might be changed by education or any other processes, and how both faith and successful faith formation might be measured. Rarely if ever, do those who use the term faith formation define exactly what they mean or indicate clearly how the process is substantially different from education; hence the problematic assumptions are not addressed (Rossiter 2018). I have yet to see any unequivocal research evidence showing how a designated faith formation processes has changed young people’s personal faith. My view is that the inner recesses of an individual’s personal relationship with God are private, complex and even mysterious. It is not an area for scrutiny, but one to respect and reverence. On the other hand, there is evidence of how young people can be well *educated* spiritually and religiously. And this is what should be addressed in RE. No doubt this may well *theologically enhance* their personal faith. But how this plays out can be respectfully left to God and the individual.

There is a better way of understanding the potential links between educational processes and any personal change (including faith). Rather than work from the questionable assumption *that on cue we can intentionally change students personally*, we need to explain RE (and education generally) as *educating young people to be better able to author their own personal change*. This ‘spirituality-resourcing’ interpretation is more realistic and ethical – it is not so prone to psychological manipulation and dis-respecting students’ personal freedom, an essential for any authentic personal faith.

It is significant to note that the item that ranked second showed 51% (with another 20% not sure) considering that use of the term faith formation made unrealistic presumptions about both the personal faith of students and about how RE might change their faith. This suggests some inherent inconsistency between the results for these two items – if personal change was a key factor in respondents’ thinking for the first ranked item, then one might have expected

correspondingly less agreement with the second ranked item. Only 43% agreed (with 28% not sure) that one could readily identify a faith formation activity as distinct from an educational one.

My conclusion: Overall, the signs of ambiguity in the results for section 4, especially for the two most highly ranked items, are indicators of a largely unacknowledged ambiguity in Catholic educators’ thinking about faith formation that is widespread. As yet, there has been little questioning of the meaningfulness of using this term as a label for teacher professional development programs. And similarly, the ambiguity in considering faith formation as a substitute for RE has not been contested.

The personal dimension to classroom RE

The item which coupled *personal faith sharing* with *Christian witnessing* in section 1 was ambiguous and therefore flawed. They are not necessarily the same or related. But this item attracted the third highest ranking (even higher than faith development and faith formation), indicating that the subtext is important for the narrative and practice of RE. It revolves around the larger question of *the place of personal interactions in classroom RE*.

Given the limitations of space here, readers are referred to Crawford and Rossiter (2006), who argued that the valuable place for personal contributions to the learning process in RE, on the part of both students and teachers, needed ethical caution, avoiding both presumption and psychological pressure on students to talk about ‘their personal faith journey’. Similarly, Rossiter (2021) cautioned against misunderstanding the application of witnessing (i.e. how Christ-like individuals are in their interactions with others) to classroom RE as if it were a pedagogy and as if it legitimated the privileging and advocacy of the teachers’ own personal religious views. Teacher personal testimony should never be the principal content of RE.

Evaluation of use of the term Catholic identity

As noted earlier, the prominence of the Leuven university Catholic identity project in Australia readily accounts for the highest ranking of the item about the core ‘recontextualising’ agenda for enhancing Catholic identity in Schools (51% in agreement). However, only 33% agreed that recontextualising was the first thing that the term brought to mind.

The results for this cluster of items in Section 5 showed that Catholic identity is regarded as important. But there are also signs of potential problems – especially those noted in the three items that tapped into concerns about how non-Catholics and relatively non-religious Catholics may feel uncomfortable about the term’s usage, and about how the term sounded like a ‘Catholic church slogan’. While there was a significant minority in the agreement area (average 40%), there were also many in the ‘not sure’ category (average 26%).

The same pattern of significant minority concerns also emerged in the two items that registered discomfort about the ‘inward looking’ focus of Catholic identity, and about lack of clarity and ambiguity in its meaning (average *agreement* 42% with *not sure* average of 15%).

Problems with the use of the term Catholic identity identified here are interpreted in detail in Rossiter (2018, 2020).

A general picture of the positive valuation of the terms *faith formation* and *Catholic identity* is evident in the new scales – especially when compared with the scale for *critical evaluation of culture*.

New scales constructed from pertinent items	Faith formation	Catholic identity	Critical evaluation of culture
Mean score (20-100)	58	50	77

% participants above the half way score of 60	43%	27%	88%
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An account of what a dimension of critical pedagogy and issue-oriented content might add to Religious Education is given in Rossiter (2018), and an example student study of a contemporary issue (personal identity development in a secular, consumerist culture) is given on <https://asmre.org/BCERML.html>

Conclusions

Ideally, more extensive survey participation, together with interviews, are needed to see if the ‘pointers’ that emerged in this preliminary study are evident across the wider population of educators involved with Australian Catholic schooling. But I understand the reluctance of Catholic school authorities to authorise a wider investigation because it opens doors to questioning the relevance of ecclesiastical language for RE – a language that has become firmly embedded in the current narrative for Catholic school RE and in which they are heavily invested. Nevertheless, it is important that these questions are articulated and that evidence is considered. And if there is growing acknowledgment of the problem, then besides trying to remedy it, there is a need for further research to consider what sort of ‘damage’ ecclesiastical drift may be doing to teachers’ and students’ perceptions of RE, and whether it has become a handicap for the ongoing development of this vital learning area in the Catholic school curriculum.

Currently, it is difficult to find examples in Australian Catholic school documentation and websites that reflect the ideas and language used in Narratives 2-5. Two notable exceptions are Narrative 3, which was taken from the new Brisbane Catholic Education program *Religion, Meaning and Life* (BCE 2019) and the National Catholic Education Commission’s document *Framing Paper: Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools* (NCEC 2018), which gave a good account of the educational perspective on RE.

It is not so much the ecclesiastical terms themselves that are the problem. They have a rightful place in the narrative of RE. Rather, it is the imbalance in usage between the ecclesiastical and the educational. For the large majority of current Catholic school students (and their parents), a Religious Education framed exclusively in ecclesiastical terms can be easily and readily dismissed as an irrelevant part of the school curriculum and of their education. And this tends to subvert the valuable contribution it could make to resourcing their spirituality and linking them with the Catholic religious heritage.

While it is not likely that all conflicting opinions about what is the best pattern of language for the narrative of RE can be resolved, it is hoped that research like this can help promote more thinking and debate about the issues. And this may help build a more coherent narrative for RE that is, in turn, more meaningful and relevant for today’s young people and more satisfying for religion teachers.

It was surprising to me that, apart from items that were expected to be confusing for overseas participants because of the idiosyncratic Australian context, there was no statistically significant difference between the Australian and overseas questionnaire responses.

The Catholic RE context in schools in Germany is different from the Australian one because it has very few church schools. But RE is firmly established and well resourced in government/state schools. Here there is naturally less likelihood of the RE narrative being dominated by ecclesiastical language. At the 1974 Synod of Wurzburg, the German Catholic bishops put in place a ‘convergence’ argument that RE needed a balanced rationale that included both educational and theological/ecclesiastical justifications – a view that still remains in force (Altmeyer 2020). One

consequence was the inclusion of content about world religions as a standard part of the German Catholic RE curriculum.

A United States voice echoing the concern to have this balance was evident in the book *Dynamics of Catholic Education: Let the Catholic school be school* (DeThomasis 2013). DeThomasis addressed the relationship between the Catholic school and the institutional church. While not talking about RE specifically, he explained that the Catholic school is not the Catholic Church and that it had a different function from the church. Its existence was not justified solely on the grounds of being an 'annexe' of the church or instrumental to the church's mission. "The Catholic school must be free to be a school so that it can truly educate" (p. 20). He lamented claims that US Catholic schools were not 'Catholic enough' and he urged authorities to allow the schools to be free, autonomous, educational communities engaged in the exploration of truth and wisdom in a complex world – and not inwardly focused and preoccupied with reproducing a Catholic identity.

Final words: The principal hope to emerge from this study would be promotion of more balance between the use of ecclesiastical and educational language for Religious Education. In my view, the current distinct imbalance is a significant handicap for Catholic school RE.

If there was any questionnaire item that could be identified in this survey as at the crux of the matter and a hopeful indicator of where to go next, it would be the item – *there is a need for balanced use of ecclesiastical terms along with educational terms in the discourse of RE*. The item registered just under 80% agreement with another 10% not sure.

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