Sustaining School Based Religious Education Leadership

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Abstract

The number of people applying for school based religious education leadership positions is scarce in most regions throughout Australia as well as other geographical regions. Drawing on the insights from key stakeholders associated with religious education leadership in schools this qualitative study aimed to identify factors which militated against sustaining school based religious education leadership. This paper reports on the findings emanating from the study and proceeds to outline practical solutions that may contribute to attracting and sustaining future generations of religious education leaders. The key factors impacting on the sustainability of religious education leaders include feelings of disconnection, excessive demands associated with the role and a lack of structural support. Practical recommendations are outlined to contribute to sustaining school based religious education leadership. The recommendations include a review of teacher appraisal processes, equity in terms of industrial conditions and the inclusion of middle leadership positions that support the leader.

Keywords: religious education, leadership, sustainability, disconnection, connection.

Introduction

Government schools throughout Australia are responsible for the enrolment of 65.6 per cent of the student population while the remaining 34.4 per cent are educated in various private schooling systems. Just over 99 per cent of the private schools are religiously affiliated and approximately one fifth of the schools in Australia are Catholic schools (National Catholic Education Commission, 2016). Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) is the third largest diocese in the world and is responsible for teaching a quarter of Melbourne's student population across 330 schools (CEM, 2017). A distinctive feature of Catholic education in Melbourne is the belief that "each person is created in the image of God and called into communion with God (CEM, 2017). Enhancing this social sustainable institutional enterprise (Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2015) is integral to the educational leadership responsibilities of all Catholic primary and secondary school principals who are required to transmit the religious dimension of the school through all aspects of school life. This includes the curriculum, staff and student formation, community engagement, as well as communal worship. Since the Second Vatican

Council (1962–1965) principals have appointed Religious Education Leaders in their schools with delegated responsibilities to advance the religious dimension of the school (Crotty, 1998). However, since the establishment of this leadership position it has been very difficult for many leaders to sustain this position for the full term of their appointment. The average turnover rate of Religious Education Leaders in some Australian dioceses is less than two years with many leaders resigning from the position before reaching the halfway mark of the term of their employment (Blahut & Bezzina, 1998). Drawing on the insights gleaned from a recent qualitative research investigation about perceptions of Religious Education Leaders, this paper explores some of the factors that contribute to low retention rates and then proceeds to discuss possibilities for sustaining leaders to reach the full term of their appointment. However, prior to exploring retention rates and discussing ways to sustain religious education leaders an overview of the research design which guided this study is presented.

Research Background and Design

There are twenty-eight Catholic dioceses throughout Australia and each diocese is headed by a Bishop. The Bishop of a diocese is responsible for all things Catholic that are undertaken in the name of the Church. In particular, in the areas of faith and morals. Most dioceses have a centralised Catholic education agency headed by a Director to oversee Catholic education and the agency is accountable to the Bishop. These centralised bodies are commonly referred to as Catholic Education Offices and while they aim to ensure that all Catholic schools fulfil their accountability to the Church they must also comply with the legal requirements of government education authorities. The aim of the research was to understand the role and needs of the Religious Education Leader from the perspectives of key stakeholders such as members of the Clergy, members of the Catholic Education Office Executive, diocesan based Religious Education Officers, School Principals and Deputy Principals, Religious Education Leaders and those aspiring to leadership in religious education.

Drawing on the perspectives of the key stakeholders the research approach aimed to identify ways to enhance and sustain effective Religious Education Leadership that would foster and promote the Catholic identity of the school via a purposeful religious education curriculum. The research depended on the participants' willingness to participate in an in depth semi-structured interview where they were able to share their insights based on their experiences. The research was founded upon the epistemological foundation of constructionism which holds that reality is constructed through human interaction in which meanings are shared in dialogue and new knowledge is developed (M. Crotty, 1998). A theoretical perspective that complements constructionism is interpretivism and given that the study sought to capture the realities and meanings of individuals closely associated with the role of the religious education leader in Catholic schools, symbolic interactionism was an appropriate form of interpretivism underpinning this investigation (Gouldner, 1970). Symbolic interactionism is based on the premise that the self is comprised of two key components, the "I" and the "Me". Bowers, (1989) emphasised that "the Me component is the reflector" (pp. 36–37). According to the theory of symbolic interactionism each individual is comprised of multiple selves or multiple Me's and therefore "who I am depends on which Me is experienced as the most salient at the time" (Bowers, 1989, p. 37). In-depth semi-structured interviews

were used to gain access to the insights that cannot be read or observed by the researcher (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). The adoption of a semi-structured interview method aimed to encourage the most salient Me in each of the participants to be their distinct role within Catholic education.

A written invitation was sent to key stakeholders associated with and including religious education leaders in Catholic schools. There were thirty-seven affirmative respondents and all consenting participants were sent an overview of the areas that would be covered in their interview. The areas included position title, selection criteria, appointment processes, and areas of responsibility, as well as ongoing formation and appraisal. The participants' insights revealed implications for the transmission of the religious dimension within the school through sustained leadership.

The use of semi-structured interviews was the gateway for constructing knowledge of how the participants understood the role (Kvale, 1996). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were used to verify that what the researcher heard was consistent with what the participant had stated thus enabling a clear distinction between the researcher's and the participants' perceptions (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Drawing on approaches to classic grounded theory, a process of constant comparison was adopted (Strauss & Glaser, 1967). After each interview, transcripts were produced and analysed using the constant comparison process to identify emerging themes which were progressively shared with each new participant. This enabled ongoing opportunities for participants to comment upon, critique and clarify data and thus contribute to the consolidation of emergent themes (Strauss & Glaser, 1967). The process of constant comparison provides an inbuilt mechanism for data to be cross-checked and verified (Dick, 2007). The findings emanating from the interview texts identified four broad areas that worked against sustaining religious education leaders completing the full term of their appointment.

Findings

Generally, appointments to the position of Religious Education Leader are for three years however some scholars have calculated the average appointment turnover rate to be less than eighteen months (Blahut & Bezzina, 1998; Fleming, 2004). The insights gleaned from the perspective of the participants involved in this study suggest that the following factors compromise the potential to sustain religious education leaders in seeing out the full term of their appointment: a sense of disconnection, lack of qualifications, demands of the role, and lack of support.

Disconnection

Religious Education Leaders in school are qualified teachers who are registered members of the professional body of teachers in their respective geographical region. Most religious education leaders are qualified to teach in other discipline areas. They are first and foremost experienced and qualified teachers and many have been working alongside teacher colleagues for many years. However, several participants noted a sense of exclusion towards religious education leaders from their colleagues once they moved into this leadership position. The following comment reflects the sentiment shared by most participants. "This role [Religious Education Leadership] can be a lonely experience.

Staff members run away because they feel inadequate when it comes to their own religion" (Participant X). Staff avoidance of the Religious Education Leader in a school is not surprising within the context of Australia which was founded as a secular nation. People are generally ignorant about religion and not comfortable talking about it and are likely to stray away from those who are likely to make demands on them to support the religious dimension of the school (Hudson, 2016).

Further to feeling disconnected from colleagues, Religious Education Leaders who are members of the school executive team also felt disconnected from other members of the school executive. The participants felt that other executive team members did not always see the religious education leader as a leading educator with expertise in the broader educational context. The following comment by a participant captures the perception expressed by the participants involved in this study.

> *It is as if they* [other executive team members] *see the role as a defacto leadership position on the school executive. They seem to forget that Religious Education Leaders are qualified and experienced educators. Often other leadership team members do not understand the religious significance of the school or the intricate demands of the role.* (Participant J)

This perceived lack of understanding can be linked to the biases of many principals pertaining to the employment of religious education leaders. A major study about perceptions of the role of the religious education leader undertaken by Fleming (2004) revealed that in general, principals' appointments to this positon were biased towards those who could lead religious services such as public worship and reflection days. These appointment choices were made despite the position of religious education leader being advertised as a senior leadership position requiring expertise in leading in all aspect of schools life including; curriculum, pastoral care, mission, strategic development. The religious education leader role is situated within the dichotomy of ecclesial and educational leadership responsibilities (Dowling, 2012). The ecclesial responsibilities are often prioritised over the educational leadership responsibilities because other leaders do not always understand the intricacies of the ecclesial aspects in the context of education (Crotty, 2005; Fleming, 2004). Circumstances such as these contribute to the way in which religious education leaders are perceived by other members of the school executive.

Qualifications

Other factors that compromise the sustainment of Religious Education Leaders originate at a systems level, a result of diocesan policy directives (Buchanan, 2013). One example from an Australian diocese involves an industrial disparity between the determinations of salary levels for deputy principal roles. Generally salary levels for this role were determined by the number of deputy principal roles within a school and also the size of the student population. However, the experience of one participant involved in this study highlights a requirement that could be viewed as devaluing the position of a deputy principal who takes on the role of religious education leader. This participant stated

> *I was Deputy Principal Curriculum for three years and then I applied to be Deputy Principal Religious Education in the same school. When I received*

my first pay check in the new role I discovered that I was paid less. When I questioned this, my principal said that people in this role are paid less if they do not have a post graduate qualification such as a Master Degree in Religious Education. I felt devalued as no other deputy principal position tags a qualification to the income level. (Participant L)

How one perceives their value within an organisation can impact on the extent to which they feel connected or disconnected from the school community. The leadership policy from the diocese in which Participant L was employed tagged the salary level for Deputy Principal Religious Education to successful completion of a postgraduate qualification. However, incumbents to the roles of Deputy Principal Curriculum or Deputy Principal Student Wellbeing could hold these positions and be paid a higher salary level without the requirement of having a postgraduate qualification.

It is commonly acknowledged that the demands of senior leadership positions within education are onerous and time consuming (Buchanan & Chapman, 2014). Therefore, tagging a qualification to a particular senior leadership pathway as well as a salary penalty for those without a postgraduate qualification, would steer many people away from aspiring to take on a religious education leadership position. The intention of diocesan leadership policies similar to the example referred to in the paper, are to profile the importance of the religious education leader role in relation to enhancing the religious dimension of the school. Ironically, the implications of such policy decisions are counter-productive to sustaining school based religious education leadership. Practical factors that deter aspiring schools leaders from the religious education leadership pathway have been identified in Buchanan (2014) and include; the financial burden associated with studying for a higher degree qualification and the stress associated with trying to find the time to study within competing professional and personal demands on time.

Role Demands

Over the past two decades the excessive demands associated with the role of the religious education leader have been the focus of scholarly research. Liddy (1998) found that the role was too big for one person to handle and Crotty (2005) indicated that the bi-dimensional nature of the role forged a set of unprecedented challenges that extended beyond the traditional expectations of professional educators, to include ecclesial responsibilities. Fulfilling the ecclesial expectations of the role often meant that the educational demands were compromised (Dowling, 2012; Healy 2011). The participants involved in this study perceived that juggling the following demands of the role can cause more stress than satisfaction. As members of school executive teams, several participants stated that the demands of executive meetings and duties took up too much of their limited time that, according to their position description was allocated to leading religious education in the school.

I am allocated ten periods a cycle as a religious education leader and I lose nearly half of this allocation in attending executive team meetings. Then there are actions that flow from the executive meetings which take up even more time. In reality the time I have for religious education leadership is minimal because it keeps getting eaten away by the executive demands. (Participant C)

The participants involved in this study revealed that the time allocated to religious education leadership responsibilities should be devoted to advancing social sustainability of the whole person with the Catholic tradition (Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2015). The focus of the responsibilities of Religious Education Leaders should be oriented towards sustaining the ministerial dimension of a school's life including leading the sacramental programmes, as well as the liturgical and prayer life of the school. Another area of responsibility included organising community outreach and / or social justice initiatives for students both within and beyond the classroom. They were also responsible for facilitating ongoing religious formation opportunities such as retreats and spirituality days for students and staff members. The participants involved in this study also identified the responsibility of leading and engaging staff members in professional learning experiences as time consuming and the following comment is illustrative of this point.

> *I am dealing with many teachers of religious education who are not qualified and lack confidence in teaching religious education. With most of them, their heart is in the right place but they need a lot of support and I am running far more professional learning opportunities to help them engage with the religious education curriculum. In addition, I am also expected to run professional learning sessions for all teachers on aspects of the religious tradition so that they can contribute to enhancing the Catholic identity of the school.* (Participant J)

The curriculum was a major area requiring religious education leadership. In this space it was generally perceived that the religious education leader had responsibility for the whole school religious education curriculum as well as ensuring that the entire school curriculum reflected the ethos of the religious tradition. One participant summed up the demands on the religious education leader in the following manner.

> *I have been the religious education leader for three years and when I first embarked on the role I became very stressed about all that needs to be done. When I think of how much I am responsible for it is overwhelming and I have come to accept that it will not get better with time. I have realised that I cannot do it all and while I am not happy with that, it is the only way I can survive. If I tried to do it all I would find it impossible and I would have to resign.* (Participant M)

It is not surprising that the multi-faceted and challenging demands associated with the position of religious education leader as perceived by the participants involved in this study, make it difficult to attract and sustain people to the role of religious education leader. According to Miedema (2017) schools quite often miss the point and what they think will contribute to continuous and sustainable outcomes such as those oriented towards the development of the whole person, will in fact be counterproductive due to other role demands such as those placed on the religious education leader.

Support

When the principal of the school and the religious education leader's vision for religious education are aligned, the religious education leader feels supported in their role (Crotty, 2005). Support is sometimes understood as simply being asked about how initiatives are being managed. For example, a study on how religious education leaders

manage curriculum change revealed that these leaders felt supported when executive team members asked them how they were progressing, even though the team members did not offer practical help (Buchanan, 2010). The participants involved in this study still felt supported by the principal of their school. Their perception of support was in terms of the interest the principal showed towards the religious education leaders' fulfilment of their leadership responsibilities. Many participants perceived the support from the principal was shown through mentoring and encouragement in undertaking leadership initiatives.

> *The principal is someone I turn to for advice. She understands the complexities involved in leading religious education and has helped me to navigate through some complex issues. The principal offers me the inspiration to try new initiatives and to make improvements wherever possible. This kind of support is energising.* (Participant T)

However, in relation to the practical day to day leadership of the religious education dimension of the school, several participants perceived a lack of support and a feeling of being overwhelmed. They felt that the structures within the school were not always effective. A major concern expressed by the participants was the lack of middle leaders with direct responsibility for overseeing aspects of the religious dimension of the school.

> *When I was the curriculum leader in my school I could rely on the discipline leaders who directly reported to me to manage actions agreed upon by the curriculum committee or the school executive. However, when I took on the religious education leader role it soon became apparent that I was alone and dealing with every aspect on my own from preparing liturgies, organizing social justice initiatives, leading the curriculum, staff development, the list goes on … I am not sure how long I can keep doing this.* (Participant L)

Religious education leaders seldom, if ever, have a team of colleagues who directly report to them and / or lead the implementation of certain aspects of the curriculum under their direction. Several participants felt that they were in a leadership position without a team of colleagues to distribute leadership responsibilities to. They felt that the religious education leader had to do everything and apart from feeling alone as a result of this, they were also concerned about the potential risk of suffering from work related burn out.

The perceptions of the participants involved in this study indicate some factors that militate against sustaining school based religious education leadership. These factors include; a sense of disconnection with colleagues in the school executive and also with staff members in general. Also the industrial implications associated with tagging the prerequisite of a postgraduate qualification to the pay structure and position description of the religious education leader, as well as the demands of the role and lack of practical support. The following section makes recommendations intended to enhance the sustainability of Religious Education Leaders to the extent that they see out the term of their leadership appointment.

<center>**Recommendations for Sustaining Religious Education Leadership**</center>

Sustaining school based religious education leaders in Catholic schools to the full term of their leadership appointment is vital to ensuring continuity in their ability to help others present religious material sensitively, fairly and accurately (Jackson, 2016). The continuity that flows from sustained religious education leadership can contribute significantly to enabling the Christian message to be shared with the next generation who must navigate their way through the interplay between religious and secular values as well as critically reflect on ethical issues (Franzenburg, 2017; Kvamme, 2017). In the light of the perceptions gleaned from the participants involved in this study three recommendations are outlined.

Overcoming a Sense of Disconnectedness

The participants involved in this study perceive that religious education leaders experienced a sense of disconnection because some members of the executive did not understand their role or recognise their expertise as educational leaders. Furthermore, they perceived that some staff members avoided religious education leaders because they struggled with their own religious attitudes and were not comfortable with any public expression in this regard (Hudson, 2016). These concerns are problematic in the context of Catholic education because the Congregation for Catholic Education (1990) has held the position that the teacher is the key factor which determines whether or not a Catholic school will achieve its educational goals. Other key factors include the faith leadership offered by school leaders and their ability to impact on teachers' understanding of their role within a Catholic school community (Buchanan, 2011; Coll, 2009).

Teachers who accept positions in Catholic schools need to understand that their primary role is to aid the school in achieving its educational goals (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990). All teachers and school leaders must take responsibility for enhancing the religious dimension of the school and engagement, rather than disengagement with the religious education leader, may assist them in fulfilling this obligation. The religious education leader needs to take on a strategic role in helping teachers and school leaders to identify areas where they can actively participate in aiding the Catholic school to achieve its religious aims. In formalising this important responsibility, the annual performance review process that teachers and leaders undergo should require them to also identify and reflect upon ways in which they have contributed to enhancing the religious dimension of the school. Educators who recognise their responsibility to actively participate in aiding the Catholic school to achieve its aims will gain a deeper insight into the ecclesial and educational goals of the school and the role that the religious education leader plays in this. When teachers and leaders acknowledge their own role in this space and the support that religious education leaders can offer in helping them to fulfil their responsibility, then the value of collaborative interdependent connections between staff members and religious education leaders offers a sense of purpose to all parties. A sense of purpose militates against feelings of disconnection and may contribute towards sustaining religious education leaders and enabling them to reach the full term of their employment.

Qualifications

In many dioceses, religious education leadership positions are senior positions in schools, equivalent to other senior positions such as curriculum leader and wellbeing leader. This research has shown that some participants have experienced inequities in salary levels with those in religious education leadership positions receiving a lower salary than those in other senior leadership positions of equal standing. The reason for this inequity is because those undertaking a religious education leadership role are required to have a postgraduate qualification, in addition to their initial teacher training qualification, in order to receive a salary equal to other leadership positions at the level. The salary for other leadership positions of equal standing is not tied to the incumbent holding a postgraduate qualification. Those aspiring to senior leadership may steer away from the religious education leadership pathway because of the lower salary and/or because the additional demands associated with undertaking a postgraduate qualification are too challenging for many educators to undertake. These obstacles reduce the pool of educators aspiring for religious education leadership positions and threaten the sustainability of this role in all Catholic schools. It is recommended that dioceses re-examine their religious education leadership appointment policy and ensure that salary levels for this position are not tied to holding a postgraduate qualification. This will ensure that salary inequity is not a blocker to sustaining school based religious education leadership. Alternatively, it is recommended that dioceses review all their senior leadership appointment policies and if they conclude that a postgraduate qualification is required, then it should be required in all senior leadership appointments. For example, a Curriculum Leader should hold a Master Degree in Curriculum Studies, a Wellbeing Leader should hold a Master Degree in Pastoral Care and a Religious Education Leader should hold a Master Degree in Religious Education. Either way the recommendation, in summary, is that the salary level and postgraduate requirements for senior leadership positions should be equal. This kind of equity will contribute to sustaining school based religious education leadership.

Role Demands and Support

The participants involved in this study perceived that the demands of the role are too great for one person to handle and concerns about the excessive demands of the role have been raised for decades (Buchanan, 2014; Crotty, 2005; Dowling, 2012; Fleming, 2004; Healy, 2011; Liddy, 1998). A key factor contributing to the excessive demands associated with the role is a result of the lack of practical support for the religious education leader to carry out the role (Buchanan, 2006). Traditionally, this senior leadership position evolved in a way in which religious education leaders had no personnel directly reporting to them or middle leaders to whom they could delegate responsibility. This meant that religious education leaders had to take responsibility for doing virtually everything associated with advancing the religious dimension of the school. In collaboration with the principal and diocese it is recommended that schools undergo a major restructure in this space and create middle leadership positions to specifically support the religious education leader in enhancing the religious dimension of the school. Middle leadership positions could include areas such as; liturgy and prayer; social justice, retreats, faith development.

This study has identified some practical areas in which strategies could be implemented that would contribute towards sustaining school based religious education leadership in reaching the full term of their appointment. The complexities surrounding sustainability in this area require further research at an international level, focussing on what sustains and disconnects religious education leaders in religiously affiliated schools. Collective international insights would help to identify and advance additional ways forward in sustaining school based religious education leadership which is of fundamental importance to the survival of religious education as a discipline and promotion of and witness to Catholic identity in many schooling systems.

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