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New Thinking, New Scholarship and New Research in Catholic Education

Responses to the Work of Professor Gerald Grace

Edited by Sean Whittle



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The future trajectory of the narrative of Catholic school Religious Education

Graham Rossiter

Introduction: Gerald Grace and Catholic Religious Education

This chapter, in a book acknowledging and honouring the scholarship of Gerald Grace, provides a timely opportunity for looking at a sub-narrative of Catholic education – Religious Education in Catholic schools. Arguably, Religious Education is the most distinctively religious and Catholic aspect of Catholic schools.

Grace has not studied Religious Education (RE) in detail, but has always recognised its important place and role in Catholic schooling. When I spoke with him in 2001 at the *Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education* (CRDCE) in London, I found him quick to acknowledge the contemporary issues for RE and to discuss wide-ranging implications – even some humorous ones deriving from his lateral thinking. For example, when talking about problems with professional language in education generally and in RE in particular, he recalled with humour how his doctoral research supervisor, the well-known sociologist and linguistics scholar Basil Bernstein, was surprised, disappointed and somewhat annoyed when someone reported that on reading one of his papers he understood it perfectly at first reading. Apparently, for Bernstein, being abstruse and not easily accessible seemed to be essential ingredients in good academic writing. Gerald and I were ‘on the same page’ in having a different view. Accessibility, clarity and focus on significant issues have always been characteristic of Grace’s writings on Catholic education.

Over the years of his editorship of *International Studies in Catholic Education* (2009–2021), Gerald Grace examined many articles for publication. For him, ‘examination’ was the appropriate word to use – with connotation from the examination of research theses – because he scrutinised the material, often suggesting where further clarification was needed and where ‘explanatory end-notes’ would enhance readability. From this work, he built up professional familiarity with developments and issues in Catholic education in many contexts around the world. Also, he looked at RE carefully, appreciating its pivotal role in Catholic education, especially in Catholic schools.

Both Grace's professional dealings with RE¹ as well as the contribution of *International Studies in Catholic Education* (ISCE) to international discussion of RE are evident in the published ISCE articles, as well as in book reviews and editorials. While only 18 (7%) of the 256 articles published (up to Volume 12, Issue 2) are specifically concerned with RE, this measure tends to under-rate its presence and significance. The most web-viewed article in the journal is on secondary curriculum implications for Catholic social teaching by Gerald Grace (7,757 views, October 2020).² Of the top ten most viewed articles, the second, third and ninth-placed articles were on RE, and overall, six of the top ten had significant implications for RE. A good proportion of all the journal articles have some implications for RE.

The rest of this chapter will be concerned with reviewing the current discourse or narrative for Catholic RE in schools, proposing a way forward.

Problems with the language in the discourse of Religious Education in Australian Catholic schools

This material will focus specifically on the Australian Catholic school context. This specificity can be taken into account by educators concerned with evaluating the situation of Catholic RE in other countries.

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 nuanced connotation refers to the 'storyline' 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 particular 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 for Catholic RE 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 & Rossiter, 1985, p. 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. Since 1981, publications by Crawford and Rossiter collectively (1981, 1985, 1988, 2006, 2018) drew attention to various aspects of this problem, including the multiplicity of ecclesiastical terms as well as the way that devotional and emotional titles, and presumptive language had negative effects on religion curricula and teaching.³

More recently, Rossiter (2020), in the current issue of ISCE, explained the problem he 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 the rise of new religious leadership roles in Catholic schools) that these ecclesiastical terms have been replacing the word Religious Education. For example: in one instance, the re-badged, advertised role description of the former diocesan RE Director did not include any direct mention of RE. Also noted in this study, has been a deleterious effect on RE as an academic discipline in Catholic tertiary institutions.⁴

Only some conclusions from the study will be noted here where the focus will turn towards what might be done to address this ongoing question, which I consider to be *the* major ongoing problem for the future of Australian Catholic RE.

- Excessive use of ecclesiastical language, at the expense of the word ‘education’, turns the focus *inwards* towards Catholicism – at the very time when more of an *outwards* focus on the shaping influence of culture is needed.
- 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 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.⁵

What might be done to address the problem of ‘ecclesiastical drift’ and to create a more meaningful and relevant narrative for, and practice of, Religious Education

The remainder of the chapter will summarise principles/issues as part of an overall strategy that might help bring more balance to the discourse of Catholic school RE by emphasising its educational value and processes. Hopefully, this can assist in re-configuring the creative tension that needs to exist between legitimate ecclesiastical and educational perspectives on RE. And in turn, this can flow through into enhancing classroom practice.

What follows is in one sense not anything new. It is proposed simply as putting a spotlight on current best thinking and practice. This could be affirming for religion teachers as well as more inviting to teachers who are considering involvement. Detailed academic references related to the items have been omitted. This does not mean that they lack academic roots and credibility. The list of principles/issues may well be ‘old hat’ for many religion teachers – if this is the case, and if a high proportion are ‘on the same page’, then I would see this as ‘good news’. Inevitably, there are different and conflicting estimates of the nature and purposes of school RE, and individuals will disagree with, and diverge from, the value positions stated here. But as well as proposing emphases that will address ecclesiastical drift, this material will help readers identify more readily which are the issues that they consider still remain controversial and open to debate. It can serve as a ‘checklist’ of issues on which religious educators need to take some stance.

In brief, this is about building a narrative for RE that can give a *meaningful account of the educational value of this core spiritual/moral subject* in the curriculum which can *resource the spirituality of young people* for life in the 21st century, whether or not they are formally religious or Catholic. Hopefully, this narrative can enhance both the perceptions RE as well as its classroom practice. In turn, this might help ‘put Religious Education back on the Catholic schools map’ – because in recent years there seems to have been a discernible loss of focus for RE, especially in the language used for articulating its purposes.

Firstly on the broad canvas, the narrative of RE needs to emphasise its three main functions.

- Giving young people substantial access to their Catholic religious heritage with knowledge (and experience where relevant) of theology, scripture, liturgy, prayer, morality, Church history etc.;
- Some knowledge of other religious traditions that are present in Australia⁶ and of their complex interactions with society;
- Skills in the critical evaluation of the shaping influence of culture on beliefs, values and lifestyle, together with study of contemporary spiritual/moral issues. This aspect needs to have more prominence in the senior classes.

Elements in a ‘revitalising’ strategy for the narrative of Religious Education

1 Avoiding ecclesiastical drift language and restoring balance by giving more attention to educational and psychological accounts of Religious Education

Because ecclesiastical terms are so deeply embedded in the current discourse of RE, it has become difficult for educators to articulate its purposes without recourse to them (Rossiter, 2018, p. 132). But it is educationally rewarding to try to do so – re-formulating one’s understanding of RE in terms that are meaningful and relevant for students and teachers.

2 Enhancing students’ perceptions of the educational and potential personal value of the subject Religious Education

The narrative for RE needs to give more attention to explaining for both students and teachers its educational values. It is the only core subject that is directly concerned with the spiritual/moral dimension to life. It can cover this content to help *resource the personal spirituality* of young people no matter what their religious disposition. Children have a *right* to an informative education in their own cultural religious tradition; at their own personal level they will respond differently and not all will become active members of the church. But all need to become properly *educated* citizens, and this includes systematic knowledge and understanding of religion.

In addition to the above educational values of RE, attention can be given at different places in the religion curriculum to highlighting the following.

- While RE is about *educating* young people spiritually, morally and religiously, the process hopefully will enhance their capacity to find meaning and value in life, and in decision-making, while trying to navigate a happy life in a challenging culture, in difficult times. The current pandemic has amplified the uncertainty and fears that many young people were already experiencing; previously secure and stable presumptions about lifestyle, freedom, career, travel, media, communications, peak experiences etc. now seem more contingent and fragile, making it more pressing to give attention to clarifying personal values and goals in life. Education cannot make young people wise – but it can *resource their wisdom*. Hopefully, the knowledge and skills gained from RE can help them become more capable of learning from their life experience.
- Students’ awareness of contemporary spiritual/moral issues and the value of analytical and interpretative skills for their evaluation. Growth in confidence that they can research important questions and make better-informed decisions.

- Research indicates that young people with reasonable theological backgrounds are less likely to be ‘conned’ into joining religious cults.
- As noted in the UK in the 1970s, being educated in religions has been a valuable background for people engaged in various roles of public service (e.g. doctors, nurses, paramedics, teachers, police, health care, lawyers, etc.).

3 The importance of a core spiritual/moral subject in the school curriculum

This is a long-held key element in Catholic educational philosophy and the most distinctively religious aspect of Catholic schooling.

Catholic educational philosophy has always upheld the principle that *any school curriculum (even in state schools) that does not have a learning area that attends specifically to the spiritual/moral dimension would be judged as deficient*. This is the rationale for having RE as a core element in the curriculum of Catholic schools since their origins in Australia in the early 1800s.

This argument suggests that RE should be regarded as philosophically the most important subject in the curriculum. The fact that it has low status and how this fuels students’ dislike of RE will be considered later (Item 5).

4 Religious Education as a challenging academic subject across the school curriculum

RE should be an academic subject, which in no way suffers by comparison with the academic demands made by other regular subjects. For this principle to work, it has to apply from the earliest primary school years. What is considered to be ‘academic’ will naturally be different depending on the age and level of maturity of the students. For example, in the early years a literal ‘hands-on’ approach is a part of being ‘academic’.

This principle means that RE should abide by all the standard protocols for student study, assignments and examinations and assessment procedures. Where challenging academic study is not experienced by students, they are more likely to consider RE as of little consequence in their schooling.

What happens in religion classes should be comparable with what happens in other standard academic subjects in the school curriculum. Hence, there should be a transfer of good teaching methods and skills into religion lessons.

5 Acknowledging and addressing the problem of negative student perceptions of religion and Religious Education

Because of the relatively low cultural regard for religion in secularised Western countries, it is inevitable that this will flow over into poor perceptions of RE by Catholic school students and their parents. While RE is philosophically the most important life-related subject in the curriculum, its perceived life-relevance is ‘subverted’ by a number of socio-cultural and educational factors. This is

explained in detail in Crawford and Rossiter (2006, ch. 14, especially pp. 307–309; see also Middleton, 2001).⁷

There is no formula that will completely solve this problem. Even where students have said they ‘like RE’ and acknowledge that they can learn something valuable about life from it, they will still feel that it is of little importance by comparison with the subjects that ‘count’ like English, Maths etc. Acknowledging the problem as a sort of ‘natural’ one these days is important for RE teachers – and for their mental health. Anything that can be done to enhance students’ experience and perceptions of the subject, including the proposals here, will be helpful.

6 The potential place for the teachers’ own beliefs and commitments in classroom interactions: The ethics of teaching

This and the following four sections as a block deal with questions that have significant ethical implications for teachers as well as students. They are concerned with the interactions and learning transactions that occur in the classroom. They have a considerable bearing on both content and pedagogy, and on expectations of what should be achieved in RE. For many years, I have been puzzled why diocesan RE documents in Australia do not address these questions in any depth. While I believe that most religion teachers follow their own healthy professional instincts on these questions, there remains some ambiguity and uncertainty that, in my view, have been created and sustained by the ongoing problem of ecclesiastical drift, which affects teachers’ understanding of the nature and purposes of RE.

This topic is an issue at the heart of the educator’s ethics of teaching. One of the best and most useful accounts of the question has been in the writings of Australian philosopher of education and Christian education scholar Brian Hill. A detailed presentation of his views is provided on the ASMRE (2020) website. The code of ethics for teaching referred to below is derived from Hill (1981).

The teacher’s personal and professional commitments should not be confused. The teacher is to help students engage with the content. Teachers may refer to their own personal views only if, and when, they judge that this makes a valid educational contribution to classroom transactions – and the same applies to the students. Their personal views are content along with the other provided content and should be subject to the same sort of academic class evaluation. The teacher should not ‘privilege’ their own personal views. Neither should they compromise Church teachings and other content by substituting their own idiosyncratic interpretation.

Pope John Paul II made a strong statement about this potential problem in *Catechesi tradendae* in 1979.

[The religion teacher/catechist] will not seek to keep directed towards himself and his personal opinions and attitudes the attention and the consent of the mind and heart of the person he is catechising. Above all, he

will not try to inculcate his personal opinions and options as if they expressed [adequately] Christ's teaching and the lessons of his life.

(# 6)

No one (teacher or students) should ever be made to feel any psychological pressure to reveal their own personal views. Anyone can 'pass' if they do not want to talk about them. If any personal sharing occurs naturally in class, that is fine and it should be valued and acknowledged. But personal testimony is not the purpose of classroom RE (while it is often more natural and prominent in voluntary religious commitment groups). Content needs to be presented impartially. The teacher should be able to model responsible, respectful, critical evaluation.

Evidence suggests that such an ethical regime in the classroom not only protects students and teachers' privacy and personal views; it makes it more likely that personal statements may be made comfortably, precisely because of the ethically respectful class environment (cf. Item 7).

Christian witnessing in the classroom? It is pertinent here to note the problem sometimes caused by misunderstanding of the implications of the teacher being a Christian witness. Christian witnessing is about how Christ-like individuals are in the way they relate to other people and the environment etc. This is about how the core values in a person are manifested. Witnessing goes on all the time both inside and outside the classroom. But 'witnessing' is not a classroom pedagogy.⁸ And it is not an un-ethical licence to purvey one's own views in the classroom. See also Item 8 below.

The place for personalism and relevance in Religious Education (Items 7–10)

7 Personalism: What does making RE personal mean? What is healthy, authentic personal sharing in the classroom? What is faith sharing? How does personal sharing foster personal and spiritual development? What ethical caution is needed to prevent manipulation?

The stance that teachers take on the issues signposted here strongly influences what they will try to achieve in their classroom interactions with students and in interactions between students. A more detailed discussion of 'The quest for personalism and relevance in Religious Education' is given in Crawford and Rossiter (2006, ch. 17, pp. 391–408.)

Since the 1960s, one of the principal driving motifs in Catholic RE was the intention to make it more *personal* and *life relevant* for young people (Buchanan, 2005; Rossiter, 1999; Ryan, 2013). Not all the efforts in this direction were successful. In particular, where so-named 'personal sharing' discussions came to dominate RE, they were perceived by students as contrived rather than authentically personal; they felt uncomfortable with any perceived psychological pressure to reveal the inner self. This same problem exists to some extent in contemporary RE when too much attention is given to 'sharing your personal

story’ or ‘witnessing your faith journey’ (cf. Item 8 below) – an approach which is more relevant in retreats than in the classroom; but even in retreats it causes problems (Rossiter, 2016).⁹

The desirability of healthy personalism and relevance in RE has never been in question. Perhaps now they are more pertinent and important than at any previous time. The critical questions are about *how much* and *what sort* of personalism and relevance are desired, and how do teachers and the RE curriculum promote this in healthy and ethical ways.

Crawford (1982), in a seminal article, showed that it was really *informed debate* rather than *personal sharing* that was ‘at home’ in RE; and that a challenging academic study with the right sort of content provided the best natural context not only for such debate, but also for personal insights from students when they felt comfortable enough to contribute freely to the learning process in this way. Her study also showed how wrong it was to claim that RE could not be *personal* if it was *academic*; the two are in no way incompatible. See also Items 9 and 10 below, especially the need for personal/life-related content.

There is an interesting parallel evident in the discussion approach to British state school RE in the mid-1960s. It was influenced by the writings of Loukes (1961, 1965, 1973). But what proved problematic in both the UK and in Catholic school discussion-oriented RE was the pedagogy. Uninformed discussion could amount to little more than sharing ignorant opinions. And the intention of having ‘deep’ personal discussion was usually counter-productive. It could not sustain student interest for too long. Also, this approach was perceived by students as a low-grade pedagogy in a subject that had little academic status; the crucial missing ingredient was a high-grade pedagogy – a serious study of the issues, in the light of up-to-date expert information. Here, dialogue or discussion was one useful part of the whole study exercise – like an informed debate – and not like a time-filling, non-directed, relatively purposeless activity.

8 The relevance of ‘sharing your personal story’ and ‘witnessing your faith journey’

The religion programme *Sharing Our Story* originated in the Parramatta diocese (1999) and was adopted or adapted in some other dioceses. It was based on Groome’s (1980) Shared Christian Praxis approach. There were also references in diocesan and other literature stating or implying that ‘personal faith sharing’ was a fundamentally important process in RE. It was regarded as the transaction in RE in which personal faith ‘developed’.

The interest in personal sharing spread widely in RE in the 1970s following the impact of Carl Rogers’ (1961, 1969) relationship-centred, humanistic psychology where the idea of intimate personal sharing in encounter groups became popular with the religious personnel who accounted for most of the Catholic school religion teachers at the time. It influenced their thinking about, and practice of, personalism in the RE classroom. And in the next decade, this

morphed into the idea of personal, *religious* faith sharing in the wake of the great popularity of Fowler's (1981) *psychological* faith development theory. The term faith development still remains prominent in contemporary Catholic RE discourse.

From 15 years of conducting adult retreats, I have regularly experienced and valued the sharing of personal insights in groups. No doubt it was important for the participants and they would see it as helpful for their own lives. Whether it was the participants' fundamental faith/fidelity relationship with God that was being shared or a 'lesser' personal matter, I was never interested in wanting to know. I could comfortably leave all the details of personal faith in the hands of God and the believer. I also have first-hand experience of young people sharing personal insights in voluntary commitment groups and camps, and to a lesser extent in school retreats. In these settings, especially where participation was voluntary, there seemed to be an unspoken acceptance that sharing of personal insights was natural and healthy. But it could not be authentic if there was any psychological pressure to contribute at this level.

The religion classroom in Catholic schools is a type of public educational forum. It is not like the voluntary retreat. Hence, I take the position that 'sharing of personal/faith insights' is not a principal, or even a desirable, activity to try to make happen in this setting. The ethical principles noted in Item 6 above should apply to both students and teachers in the classroom – in RE and all other subjects. It is not that personal sharing is wrong. It is not banned. It is good and healthy when free, authentic and not contrived. And as noted in Item 7, it often occurs naturally within a sound academic study; but this is a valuable, somewhat serendipitous event. It is an unintended healthy by-product of academic study and a respectful, accepting class climate, and not a programmed or expected outcome that is essential for RE. In most cases, how young people integrate learning in RE within their own beliefs, values and lifestyle will happen privately and slowly over many years.

Problems with misunderstanding of 'witnessing' were noted in Item 6. In a study of retreats in Catholic secondary schools, Rossiter (2016) cautioned about the strategy of teachers (and others) telling their 'personal faith journey' as a stimulus to get students to do the same. While students naturally are voyeuristically interested in any personal details volunteered by their teachers, the faith journey approach can be counter-productive, particularly if it appears contrived and rehearsed, and if there is unwelcome psychological pressure on young people to make revelations about their personal thinking and values. I expect that adolescents are uncomfortable if they feel the teacher is manoeuvring them towards talking about their 'faith journey'. I heard a report from some students recently who have labelled teachers who tried this as 'over-exposures' or 'over-sharers'. There are related difficulties where a student personal RE journal or diary is required and even more so where this is to be inspected by teachers.

9 Relevance in pedagogy: The need for critical, evaluative research-oriented pedagogy, especially in the senior classes

Brian Hill described the mission of education as ‘resourcing the choosing self’; RE could make a special contribution through helping students ‘to *interrogate their own cultural conditioning* and reach a position of being able to develop an adequate personal framework of meaning and value’ (Hill, 2006, p. 55, emphasis added; Hill, 2004).

Hill took for granted that the sense of freedom and individuality permeating Westernised cultures would ensure that young people will eventually construct their own meaning, values and beliefs – even if for some (or perhaps many?) this will not be a conscious, reflective process but more a popular, cultural socialisation. Nothing could stop the ‘choosing’; but their choosing could be better *educated*. Hence, knowledge of contemporary issues and critical thinking would be important for informing life decisions, as well as knowledge of what one’s own and other religious traditions were saying about meaning in life. The religion classroom should be the very place where one might expect that students could learn how to appraise the shaping influence of culture.

A critical pedagogy and issue -related content can be a part of RE across the whole curriculum. How it is employed will depend upon the age and academic maturity of the students. The same style of pedagogy can and should be applied when teaching formally religious topics.

A good student-centred RE always includes the following pedagogical elements in an age-appropriate fashion: information-rich study; knowledge of traditions; critical interpretation; informed debate; the experiential dimension; student research.

Much more detail on an inquiring, evaluative pedagogy is provided in Rossiter (2018). Examples of presentations from students, as well as from post-graduate RE teachers that illustrate mini-research projects on contemporary spiritual/moral issues, are posted on the ASMRE (2020) website.

10 Relevance in content: Including something on world religions and on the contemporary search for meaning, including contemporary spiritual/moral issues

It is difficult to sell the idea of a religion curriculum that is relevant to students’ lives if all the content is exclusively Catholic. While in Catholic schools it is to be expected that Catholicism would be the principal content of RE, it is recognised that most of the students are not very religious and for them broader content would be beneficial. But even for the religious, regular church-going students, just studying Catholicism would be an inadequate RE. They need the second and third elements mentioned earlier just as much as the non-religious students.¹⁰

Attention to world religions has long been a part of Catholic RE, even if most diocesan syllabuses make little mention of it. In German state schools where denominational RE is taught by regular, trained departmental teachers,

study of world religions has been for many years a mandated part of the Catholic religion curriculum.¹¹

But just including some world religion content is not enough. There is a need for more issue-oriented content that is pertinent to contemporary life, including spiritual and moral issues and study of the search for meaning in a secularised, consumer society. This is important if young people are to see RE as making a valuable contribution to their education and personal development (cf. Item 2). Note for example an elective unit in the new Brisbane Catholic Education (2019) syllabus for the course *Religion, Meaning and Life* is titled ‘Identity and meaning: How people construct personal identity and community in a consumerist culture’.

In Australia, academic subjects in the senior school which are accredited for contribution to students’ university entrance qualifications have what is called ATAR registration (Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking). Other non-ATAR subjects can be studied but cannot count towards university entrance scores. Because Catholic school Y11–12 students can already study state ATAR courses like *Studies of Religion* and *Religion and Society*, and non-ATAR *Religion and Ethics*, it has been acceptable to have ‘other-than-Catholic’ content in RE programmes at this level. So the principle of allowing for the study of spiritual/moral questions that at first sight are not formally religious can be claimed as already established in Catholic RE. At this point it is noted that in my professional opinion, the state-accredited courses can be judged not to have enough life-relevant content because they have for too long stayed with the descriptive world religions approach that dominated UK school courses in the early 1970s (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006)

11 Participation in research concerned with the discourse of Catholic Religious Education

Currently, trial data collection has commenced in a survey that investigates the extent to which teachers think that there is a problem with excessive use of ecclesiastical terms in RE (ASMRE, 2020). This is an opportunity for those engaged in RE to have their say.

Ecclesiastical terms have become so embedded in the fabric of Catholic RE that any questioning of their relevance and utility tends to be resisted because it feels somewhat uncomfortable – as you would if questioning key words in the country’s founding constitution. These terms have acquired a resilience in the discourse of RE and they are likely to remain prominent for a considerable time to come. It seems unlikely then that the survey would show a high proportion of teachers who readily identified the problems in ecclesiastical drift. Hence the principal purpose of the questionnaire was to serve as an initial stimulus for religion teachers to think about the issues and potential problems. I called it the ‘stop and think’ or ‘reflective’ questionnaire. It may perhaps incline religion teachers towards a more discerning and frugal use of the ecclesiastical constructs.

The first part of the questionnaire asks for a simple valuation of various ecclesiastical and educational words for explaining the purposes of RE. This is followed by some brief narratives or scenarios for RE where an exclusively ecclesiastical narrative can be compared with others that have an educational focus.

Then questions are raised about potential problems with excessive use of ecclesiastical terms where they tend to displace the word Religious Education from the RE narrative. Attention is given to particular constructs – faith formation and Catholic identity. In addition to investigating ecclesiastical drift, the survey has items looking at the possibility of giving more curriculum space and time to critical evaluation of culture and study of the contemporary search for meaning and values in a relatively secularised society.

The questionnaire takes about 15 minutes to complete. However, some trial participants noted that it took longer because it prompted them to pause and think about the issues, resulting in some clarification of their views. The proportion of participants who choose the ‘not sure’ option for questionnaire items could end up being significant as an indicator of a ‘stop and think’ approach to the survey.

In the trial, some found it more difficult answering the initial questions evaluating the various terms; they said it was easier to answer questions that identified potential problems related to the excessive use of ecclesiastical language. While the initial trial data has not yet been analysed and while no Catholic school systems have yet participated systematically, I anticipate that the same pattern in the results of an earlier small-scale study of the views of teachers and parents by Finn (2011) would show up again. He found that teachers (more so than parents) were respectful of the ecclesiastical terms. But both groups found ‘the language was generally confusing and not helpful for understanding religious education’ (Finn, 2011, p. 84; cf. 89, 111).

Hopefully, it will be possible to get Catholic diocesan school systems interested in participating in the survey.

12 Taking into account the relative ‘secular spirituality’¹² of most students in Catholic schools

An important ‘need to know and understand’ for religion teachers is the extensive secularisation of culture in Australia and elsewhere that has an inevitable bearing on how one approaches RE. Most of the pupils in Catholic schools are, or will be, non-church-going. Nevertheless, no matter what their religious affiliation and level of religious practice, RE can make a valuable contribution to their education and personal development resources (Rossiter, 2018).

Conclusion

In looking at the history of the discourse of Catholic school RE in the English-speaking world, two significant dates were 1965 and 1971. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council released *Gravissimum educationis* (Declaration on Christian

Education) in which, somewhat surprisingly, the principal focus was education and how this could enhance the personal and religious development of people. Perhaps not all the Catholic bishops at the Council appreciated the significance of choosing a word that the Catholic Church did not 'own'. This educational emphasis was both expansive and ecumenical in scope. Prior to this, much of the Catholic focus was on 'Christian Doctrine' – the most common name for religion class in Catholic schools. The educational emphasis was naturally open to dialogue with other Christian denominations where the term 'Christian education' was prominent. This also articulated with the wider, international discourse of education.

In 1963, while in a teacher education programme, I started a book of teaching notes I called 'Christian Doctrine Instructions', and we had lectures on 'Catechetics'. But by 1967, the word Religious Education had taken over (and my book of Christian Doctrine instructions was discarded because it was irrelevant). The term Religious Education had strong cultural and educational roots in the UK where RE was a well-established subject in state schools. Michael Grimmitt's famous book in 1973 was called *What Can I Do in RE?* In North America, the Religious Education Association (with its international journal *Religious Education*) had been prominent since its founding in 1903.

In February 1970, the Italian bishops published *Il rinnovamento della Catechesi* as a national Directory for Church ministry and Religious Education. It followed through in the educational trajectory of the 1965 declaration. In August 1970, the Australian bishops published a translation of the Italian document, together with a supplement on Catholic schooling, called *The Renewal of the Education of Faith*. In Australia, this publication was intended to add substance to the completion of the Australian Catholic catechisms from kindergarten to Year 12, when the Years 11–12 books *Come Alive* were released earlier in 1970. The response to the colourful magazine style *Come Alive* was mixed. The booklets, produced by practising teachers, were liberal in tone and somewhat revolutionary in format; they were not well received by the conservatives in the Church, and for some bishops the bright discussion-informing booklets were not consistent with what they thought a catechism should be like. There was much debate about where RE was headed. Brother Bourke *et al* (1971) led the conservative critique in publishing *What's Wrong with 'Come Alive'*. The liberal response promptly labelled their book '*Drop dead*' as a comic alternative name, contrasting with that of the new catechism, *Come Alive*.

The Renewal of the Education of Faith was also published in 1970 in the UK by T Shand Publications. But it is not clear what currency the document had in Catholic education there or in New Zealand.

Then came the second crucial event in 1971. That year, the Roman Congregation for the Clergy released the *General Catechetical Directory*. This signalled that the apparent 'romance with education' was over. From then on, *faith* or derivative terms (like catechesis, faith development, and

more recently faith formation and Catholic identity) would gradually tend to replace the word Religious Education in the discourse of RE itself. Even though the word Religious Education remains the name of the school subject, the dominance of ecclesiastical terms (ecclesiastical drift) created ambiguity about its nature and purposes. And this has had a lasting effect on the trajectory of the RE discourse, especially in the last 15 years (Rossiter, 2018, pp. 87–93).

This chapter, as part of the volume honouring Gerald Grace, has attempted to raise awareness about what is considered to be a significant problem for Catholic school RE going forward since 1971. And hopefully it may catalyse further research and debate on the questions considered. I know that Grace wants the journal *ISCE* to be a forum for such dialogue and debate.

To address the problem of ecclesiastical drift, it has summarised a set of principles/issues considered to be in line with best practice; it is not proposing any new approach. It recommends that efforts to revitalise the narrative of RE as a particularly valuable learning area in the Catholic school curriculum should give more attention to these aspects. And to stimulate a contemporary re-configuring of the narrative of RE, it has proffered ideas and unambiguous language that may help get RE better appreciated by teachers and students for its great potential in resourcing young people's spirituality and enhancing their capacity to construct a meaningful personal narrative for their own lives.

Also, this discussion, by giving attention to the educational dynamics of RE, may help affirm what religion teachers do best – *educating*. It can help both current and prospective RE teachers by projecting more realistic *expectations* about the knowledge/skills student outcomes of RE, together with *hopes* about how it might enhance their personal spirituality. And this lessens the problem where RE is evaluated in terms of changing young people's level of religious practice. For Australia, this may help give RE a more realistic, but also prominent and important, place in the larger discourse of Catholic education. In brief, these efforts may help 'put Religious Education back on the "Catholic school map"' – front and centre. How pertinent the issues are in other countries is yet to be determined; responses to this chapter, I know, would be welcomed by the Editor of *ISCE*.

Notes

- 1 It must be remembered that there are a number of journals specifically dedicated to Religious Education and it is likely that RE teachers direct their articles to these journals. This tends to keep discussion 'in-house'. The *ISCE* journal, which is interdisciplinary in readership, opens such discussion to a larger academic and professional audience.
- 2 Grace has always suggested that Catholic social teaching should be interpreted within Catholic RE, on the principle that 'faith without works is dead' (St James). The number of views for this article suggests that many teachers in schools and colleges are interested in this approach.

- 3 Presumptive language is evident when the RE language, both in the literature and in the classroom, presumes that all students are, or should be, regular churchgoers and that they will assent to the views being presented. A common example is evident in the way the word 'we' is used as if all present agree.
- 4 See, for example, the account of the effects on RE in Catholic tertiary institutions in Australia in the paper at <https://asmre.org/EDrift.html>
- 5 There is anecdotal evidence of this problem in Australian Catholic schools. As noted in the chapter, empirical research on this question has been initiated, with data from a small pilot testing of the questionnaire yet to be analysed.
- 6 Of the just under 25 million Australians, 52% are Christian (with 23% Catholic and 13% Anglican). Other world religions represented are: Islam (2.6%), Buddhism (2.4%), Hinduism (1.9%), Sikhism (0.5%), and Judaism (0.4%). In 1911, the year of the first Australian census, the number who indicated they had no religion was 0.4%. In the 2016 census for the same question on religious affiliation, 30.1% indicated 'no religion' and a further 9.6% did not answer this census question (total of 39.7%).
- 7 The low status of RE in Australian schools generally is well known to both teachers and the wider community. The references cited here attempt to explain it in detail. I do not know to what extent this may be the case in other countries.
- 8 This is a complex question. In Catholic schools, the need for Catholic teachers who are engaged with the Church and the need for religion teachers who are believers and committed to the values in studying religion are not in question. The issue here is about cautioning those who use the idea of being a Catholic witness to justify unethical teaching procedures in the classroom.
- 9 School retreats follow in the long spiritual/religious tradition for retreats in the Catholic Church. See <https://asmre.org/retreats.html> for an account of a recent substantial research project on retreats in Australian Catholic secondary schools.
- 10 I know of no systematic research about how parents perceive the inclusion of some study of other religions in Catholic RE. I consider that it would be viewed as making a valuable contribution to their children's religious education.
- 11 There is anecdotal evidence that teachers in Catholic RE regard the inclusion of some study of other religions as a valuable part of RE. This is presumed in the general acceptance of state-developed religion studies courses available in Years 11–12 in a number of Australian states. Catholic schools provide the large majority of the candidature in these subjects.
- 12 The term 'secular spirituality' has been widely used to describe the spirituality of people who consider themselves 'spiritual' but not 'religious', and of those who are not religious, but who have a non-religious spirituality 'implied' in their values and moral behaviour, as explained in detail in Rossiter (2018) and Crawford and Rossiter (2006).

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