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CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT: INFLUENCING SCHOOL OUTLOOK TOWARDS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.

Abstract
Several dioceses in Australia have been involved in the management and implementation of new curriculum initiatives in religious education. Based on the findings of a broader study on religious education coordinators' management of a curriculum change in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, this paper considers some ways in which curriculum management can influence school outlook towards the discipline of religious education. School outlook refers to the priority given to a particular curriculum area such as religious education. This paper makes particular reference to curriculum management issues such as, staffing, working with leadership teams and promoting curriculum credibility for religious education are explored to demonstrate the interplay between curriculum management and school outlook.

Introduction
This paper addresses the question whether the management of a curriculum change can influence 'school outlook' towards a subject or discipline taught within the curriculum. The term 'school outlook' referred to in this paper is concerned with the priority given to a particular curriculum area within the school. This question will be explored by drawing upon data emanating from a broader study of the management of curriculum change in religious education in the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne. The likely impact the management of curriculum change can have upon school outlook would be of interest to any school involved in change management. In particular, since 2001 several Catholic archdioceses and dioceses throughout Australia have been involved in the development and implementation of new religious education curricula. As well, hundreds of Catholic primary and secondary schools throughout parts of Australia have been involved in the management of curriculum change in religious education. Drawing from the insights gained from interviews with religious education coordinators (RECs) involved in a curriculum change in Melbourne, this paper outlines their perceptions regarding the influence change management can have on school outlook towards a curriculum area. An outline of the broader study from which the insights are drawn will provide the context for considering the influence that the management of change can have on school outlook towards a discipline such as religious education.

Background information concerning the broader study
Utilising a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1998) the researcher investigated the way in which RECs managed a particular curriculum change in religious education. The study focussed on a curriculum initiative designed for Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. In 2001 every Catholic school in Melbourne was directed by the archbishop of the time, to implement a 'text-based curriculum' (Pell, 2001, p. 5). While the term 'text-based curriculum' had not been clearly defined in relation to this project, it was understood to be an initiative requiring each Catholic school to write its own religious education curriculum based on the contents of a textbook series that had been mandated for use in all Catholic schools within the archdiocese; *To Know Worship and Love*. Each school was responsible for writing its own school-based curriculum in religious education and this was a trend that had been established long before this 'top down' direction to implement a text-based curriculum was given by the archbishop.

Since the early 1970s the curriculum trend in religious education involved each Catholic school writing its own curriculum based on a series of guidelines endorsed by the Archbishop and produced by the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne. The guidelines were officially referred to as *Guidelines for Religious Education of Students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (1995, 1984, 1977, 1974) and commonly referred to as *Guidelines*. *Guidelines* were underpinned by a particular approach to religious education known as the life-centred approach. Amalorpavadass (1973, 1971) a Jesuit theologian had argued that God could be revealed to people in the ordinariness of their every day life experience and his views inspired Catholic leaders in Melbourne to incorporate this approach into the teaching and learning schema underpinning *Guidelines*. By the

mid 1990s many criticisms about the life-centred approach to curriculum development were apparent (Engebretson, 2002). The *To Know Worship and Love* textbook series was introduced as a curriculum change that emphasised an importance in the acquisition of knowledge centred learning (Pell, 2001, p. 5; see also Hart, 2002, p. 6).

Against this backdrop concerning the transition from a life-centred approach to religious education to a knowledge centred text-based curriculum, the researcher investigated how the RECs managed change. In Catholic secondary schools in the archdiocese RECs became responsible for managing this 'top down' curriculum change directed by Cardinal Pell the former Archbishop of Melbourne. Professional development seminars were organised by Catholic education authorities such as the Catholic Education Office and the Episcopal Vicar's Office for Religious Education, not only to assist, but in recognition that it was perceived as the responsibility of the REC to lead and manage this particular curriculum change. The researcher conducted several interviews with RECs from Catholic secondary schools involved in change management in their schools. A grounded theory approach was used (Glaser, 1998) to construct a theory of the RECs' perceptions of change management. According to Goulding (2002) a key principle of grounded theory proposes that the theory must emerge from the data. Because of the significance of the RECs' perceptions direct quotes from the texts of the interviews will be used to demonstrate the impact managing curriculum change has on influencing school outlook towards religious education. In order to respect the confidentiality of the REC a letter has replaced the name of the RECs' quoted in this paper. The RECs' management of the curriculum change encouraged a view that gave greater priority to this curriculum area than had previously been given.

Attention to issues concerning staffing religious education classes, working collaboratively with school leadership on matters concerning religious education and promoting religious education as a credible curriculum area, were three broad issues that the RECs perceived as promoting a positive school outlook towards religious education.

Staffing religious education classrooms
Many teachers in Catholic secondary schools do not have qualifications to teach religious education. They do not have the required understanding of the theory of religious education and their knowledge background concerning this discipline is extremely diverse (Rymarz, 1998, p. 30). Most RECs perceived that the management of the text-based curriculum initiative involved a knowledge centred approach to learning and teaching. It brought to the

fore concerns about the standard of knowledge and qualifications teachers had in the area of religious education. In order to manage the change effectively some RECs stressed the benefits of ensuring that qualified teachers of religious education be involved in the teaching of this discipline. The opportunities for RECs to be involved in the selection and appointment of teachers of religious education varied from school to school; however three broad levels of the involvement emerged from the interview data. The levels of involvement have been categorised as a) direct involvement b) negotiated involvement c) no involvement.

The RECs who were involved in the short-listing of applicants for interview, the interview and appointment process appeared to have direct involvement in the appointment of religious education teachers. RECs who were directly involved were more likely to generate a cohesive perspective amongst members of the faculty regarding the nature of religious education and the role of the RE teacher. Given the diverse backgrounds, knowledge and perceptions teachers have towards religious education (Rymarz, 1998) direct involvement in the selection and appointment of religious education teachers by the REC was one possible way of influencing a cohesive school outlook towards religious education. Crotty (2005) has explored the educational and ecclesial dichotomy associated with the role of religious education and RECs. The bi-dimensional nature of the role can cause confusion about the way in which religious education is perceived and the priority given to it within the school. One REC was particularly interested in promoting a school outlook that emphasised an educational perspective towards religious education:

> *The tradition at my school was that the REC was always involved in the appointment of staff. So I would actually have input into who would be teaching RE. I favoured an education in religion approach and selected staff who had RE qualifications and favoured an education in religion approach.* (C)

The opportunity to select and appoint religious education teachers with similar philosophies and understandings about the nature and purpose of religious education and the role of the religious education teacher provided an opportunity to establish a school outlook that projected a cohesive faculty approach to implementing the text-based curriculum.

In some situations the RECs were not involved in the selection and appointment of religious education teachers. However, they were able to

advise the principal regarding the qualities and/or competencies they considered beneficial in the appointment of an RE teacher. The term 'negotiated involvement', has been used by the researcher to describe situations where the principal acted on the information received from the REC. The following is an example of how negotiated involvement influenced school outlook towards religious education. Recognising the emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge content associated with the text-based curriculum one REC foresaw the benefits of attracting qualified RE teachers to the faculty. The REC had not been involved in the selection and appointment process of any staff member but was able to negotiate with the principal the possibility of advertising for qualified teachers of religious education:

> *Instead of advertising for a Maths teacher with a willingness to teach RE, the principal will now advertise for an experienced and qualified teacher of Religious Education and Maths. It has made a difference. Most applicants just have the minimum RE background - the subjects they did in their teacher training at the Catholic university. But now and then we get some applicants who have a degree or diploma in RE. These staff members have a made a big difference to the RE faculty. The staff began to realise the importance of religious education in the school rather than just paying lip service to it.* (L)

Managing the transition to a knowledge-centred text-based religious education program has brought to the fore the significant contribution qualified teachers of religious education make to classroom teaching as well as curriculum development and implementation. Advertising for, and appointing qualified religious education teachers has influenced school outlook by promoting the importance of religious education as an academically rigorous.

Another example of negotiated involvement by an REC involved encouraging a principal to plan for teachers of religious education to teach the same year level from year to year as well as to teach more than one class at the same level. In this particular school (but not exclusive to this school) teachers were generally given one class in religious education as a means to fill up their teaching allotment for the year. There was no guarantee from one year to the next whether a teacher would be given a class in religious education. Nor was there any guarantee that a teacher would be given the same year level in the proceeding year. In the process of managing the implementation of a knowledge-centred text-based curriculum the REC

perceived that professional development could take place within the context of the school (Fleming, 1998) through reflection on the teaching and learning process (Marsick, 1998). Therefore it was perceived that greater priority needed to be given to providing opportunities for staff to teach multiple religious education classes consecutively from year to year. The adoption of such an approach would create a school outlook that gave priority to staffing religious education classes and confirmed the importance of teacher familiarity with the knowledge content relevant to the course:

> *I was able to negotiate with the principal about staffing for the following year. I wanted to keep teachers at particular year levels because they had been teaching at that year level and they could consolidate what they had learned. I wanted some teachers to take more than one RE class at the same year level so they could develop the course and I wanted more qualified teachers. I think it was difficult for the principal to do all that, but a lot of the time, in most cases he was actually able to assist in that way.* (B)

The opportunity to teach religious education at the same year level over a few years was perceived as providing unskilled and unqualified teachers of religious education with an opportunity to develop pedagogical and knowledge competencies relevant to the religious education curriculum through their teaching experience. Negotiated involvement also provided an opportunity for teachers to teach more than one RE class at the same year level. It was perceived by some RECs that if a teacher taught more than one class at the same year level, then there was a greater chance that the teacher would put more effort into planning religious education lessons. Managing the change in this manner promoted a school outlook that stressed that lesson planning was valuable to the learning and teaching process.

In some situations where an REC indicated that they had no involvement in the selection and appointment of religious education teachers the school outlook regarding religious education as a curriculum area was not always highly favourable. Some RECs commented on the difficulty of promoting a uniform school outlook concerning the role of religious education and the religious education teacher. One REC alluded to the consequence of such circumstances and suggested that it was difficult to achieve cohesion in the management and implementation of the text-based curriculum:

> *In many cases teachers are given RE to fill up their teaching load and it is difficult to know who will be teaching RE from one*

year to the next. I think the courses are unsatisfactory because of that. You have teachers at the same year level who are teaching different things and don't follow any set course. There isn't any uniformity. For many it is their second or third teaching area and they only have one class in RE and don't make the time to prepare lessons. Some make it very clear that they do not want to be teaching RE and are not willing to put effort into the planning of the units of work. (I)

The experience of this REC suggested that staffing issues relating to religious education were regarded as an after thought. In a school environment where no opportunity was created for the principal and the REC to discuss staffing issues for the faculty, a clear vision of the role of classroom religious education did not appear to have priority within the school community. In such situations school outlook towards religious education and its place within the curriculum appeared unclear and unfavourable.

One REC suggested that an REC has to work with whom ever they have appointed to their faculty. The statement below alludes to the complexities associated with curriculum leadership in situations where the religious education faculty did not have a cohesive perspective:

> *Any REC has got to work with the staff they are given. Sometimes you have a team who are all on side. Sometimes you have got to cajole teachers and other times you even have to push a little. Sometimes there are factions where some are extremely conservative and others quite radical and then there are those who are indifferent. Some have no qualifications in RE; others have done some RE subjects in their teacher training. On top of that many RE teachers are only teaching one class and they are committed to two sometimes three other faculties. (O)*

The RECs perceived that in the process of managing this curriculum change school outlook regarding religious education was given greater priority in some situations where RECs had a greater level of involvement in the selection and appointment of teachers of religious education. In such situations priority was given to employing qualified religious education teachers and in other situations priority was given to enabling teachers to professionally develop competencies in the learning and teaching context. These strategies promoted a school outlook that perceived the importance of qualifications or knowledge relevant to the content of the knowledge centred text-based curriculum.

Working collaboratively with school leadership / executive team

Fleming's (2002) research concerning the role of the REC suggested that when principals of schools appointed teachers to the position of REC the decision was mainly influenced by the ability of the teacher to fulfil a ministerial role rather than an educational role. Perceptions of the REC as a ministerial leader implied a bias towards the importance of the role within the Church rather than education (Crotty, 2005; Ryan, Brennan & Willmet, 1996). There was a tendency to appoint RECs who could fulfil ministerial tasks such as leading school liturgies, retreats, social justice groups and prayer groups. Issues concerning educational leadership skills were seldom discussed in the appointment of an REC and perhaps accounted for why the position of REC was not perceived as a position of senior leadership in every Catholic secondary school (Fleming, 2002).

In order to manage the implementation of a text-based curriculum some RECs suggested the importance of working collaboratively with members of the school leadership / executive team. The support of the school leadership / executive team contributed to the RECs' management and implementation of the curriculum change. Formal and informal means of communication were employed by the RECs in order to inform members of the leadership / executive team about the intended curriculum change and the implications of that change for the school. Formal means of communication included presentations and reports at leadership / executive team meetings. Informal communication involved discussions with individual members of the leadership / executive team. Communication with the leadership / executive team about the curriculum change helped to generate a school outlook conducive to its implementation. Communication with school leadership / executive had an influence on school outlook towards the change and management of the change in the following ways: a) promoted good working relationships, b) encouraged strategic planning, c) encouraged staff development, and d) encouraged a network of support.

In most situations the leadership / executive teams relied on the REC to keep them informed about the intended change. Most RECs commented on the importance of keeping members of the leadership / executive team informed. In some schools members of the team offered to support the REC in any possible way the REC perceived as appropriate:

I did my best to keep the principal and other members of the leadership team informed about the changes. They really did not know very much and relied mainly on the information I could present to them. They were always very interested in learning anything they could about the change. Communication about the intended changes helped to clarify many of the issues that we needed to consider in order to effectively implement a text-based curriculum. (J)

Communication between the REC and the leadership / executive team generated support for the REC in the management of the curriculum change. Good working relationships between the REC and other members of the leadership team were encountered by the willingness of team members to support the REC.

The REC's ability to effectively plan strategies to implement the curriculum change required the support of other members of the leadership / executive team. One REC suggested that keeping the leadership team informed about the curriculum change also assisted in the process of developing a strategic plan:

At leadership meetings there was a genuine interest in the curriculum and how I was managing the change. If I wanted staff to go on in-services, or if I needed time release, or if I wanted to run a PD session or organise a guest speaker, we would discuss it as a team and develop a plan so that it could happen without too much disruption to the school. (G)

The implementation of the text-based curriculum required RE teachers to have proficient religious knowledge and understandings about pedagogy. For many religious education teachers in the archdiocese professional development opportunities were one way to achieve the required competencies. Most RECs commented on the support given to them by the principal and leadership / executive team when expressing the need to give priority to professional development opportunities for teachers of religious education:

I feel the principal and the leadership team are supportive of the new endeavours. Financial support is given to professional development initiatives. Financial support is given to any staff member who wants to do an RE or theology course. The leadership team are always very supportive of what is being done in RE and this has a positive impact on how RE is perceived in the school. (O)

RECs who effectively communicated with members of the leadership / executive team commented on the level of support they received from other members of the team and how this assisted with the management of the curriculum change. For some RECs efforts to communicate with other members of the team helped them to strengthen their network of support:

Most of the time I feel alone in the REC role. Planning the curriculum changed required me to communicate more with others especially with other members of the leadership team. I don't think I could have managed the change without their support. From this experience I have gained a really good support network and I can get things done. (I)

The REC's initiatives to communicate issues concerning the curriculum change with the leadership / executive team helped to foster a school outlook supportive of religious education and in particular the management of this curriculum change. A supportive school outlook concerning the implementation of a text-based curriculum was reflected in good working relationships, strategic planning, staff development opportunities and a confirmed network of support for the REC. This process was perceived as promoting a positive school outlook towards religious education.

Curriculum credibility
Johnson's (1989) research on RECs suggested that RECs tended to fulfil the ministerial demands of the role over the educational demands such as curriculum development. She suggested that even in situations where the curriculum was in obvious need of development RECs tended to ignore the educational aspects of the role and focus on the ministerial demands. Fleming's (2002) research explains this preference by identifying that RECs were generally appointed because of their skills in areas of ministerial leadership. However the researcher's study concerning the RECs' management of curriculum change suggested that the RECs exercised curriculum leadership skills in a manner that intentionally set out to promote a school outlook that perceived religious education as a credible subject within the curriculum.

Some RECs managed the curriculum change conscious of the potential to endorse a school outlook that promoted religious education as a subject comparable with other curriculum areas. In schools where broader curriculum change had taken place some RECs focussed on equal compatibility between religious education and other curriculum areas:

When our principal was appointed a few years ago, our first challenge was to update the curriculum. We were certainly behind a lot of other schools. We've done a lot of work over the last few years and developed a broader and well documented curriculum. When the textbooks came along we were familiar with curriculum change and followed the same procedures. The principal and the leadership team were open to taking on board and putting into place any structures I considered necessary to implement the textbooks. Most of my suggestions were similar to what we had been doing during the past few years. (C)

Some RECs were aware of the broader curriculum change that was occurring across the curriculum in their particular school and set about implementing the text-based religious education curriculum in a manner consistent with the changes in other curriculum areas. The main areas where the RECs aimed to make religious education consistent with other curriculum areas were: a) equal time allocation for each subject, b) outcomes based assessment, c) documentation of the RE curriculum, d) use of textbooks.

Most RECs considered the textbooks to contain too much information for a course lasting one year. In most schools in the archdiocese, the time allocated to classroom religious education per year has been considerably less than the time allocated to some other subjects within the curriculum. One REC involved in implementing the text-based curriculum suggested that the school give the same time allocation to religious education as other subjects:

We were reorganising the time allocation for each subject within the whole curriculum and I thought we could achieve the same status for RE as any other subject. I had fought for Year 7's, 8's, 9's and 10's to have the same length of teaching time as the other subjects. We got six lessons per cycle whereas before we only had four. So now RE had the same power as any other subject. (G)

Equal time allocation was perceived as a means of encouraging a school outlook that perceived religious education with the same credibility as other subjects.

In another school there was a whole school curriculum approach to developing an outcomes based assessment model for each unit of work taught in every faculty. The REC leading the curriculum change in this school incorporated the

outcomes based assessment model into the religious education curriculum:

Well, fortunately for us the school was already moving in an outcomes direction in all other K.L.A.s [key learning areas]. In fact were well versed with it. We were quite aware of the word outcomes. In that sense it was good and the teachers thought it was good to actually have outcomes in RE. So it became a positive thing because it was happening everywhere else. So why not RE, you know, why does it have to be different, why is it not as rigorous as anything else, so that was another thing that the text gave us an opportunity to do. It gave us an opportunity to, to raise the standard I suppose, to raise the standard, you know, like this subject is the equivalent of every other subject. The report will look like other subjects that, you know, it is an academic subject. It does have the knowledge content, you know, it has assessment tasks and all that kind of stuff. (B)

This REC believed that adopting the school's outcomes based assessment model would promote a school outlook that perceived religious education as being of equal status to other subjects within the curriculum.

In the process of managing the change another REC documented the text-based curriculum he/she had written according to the agreed criteria used in other curriculum areas in that particular school. This approach projected a school outlook that perceived religious education with the same seriousness as other curriculum areas:

When I came to the school they were still using Guidelines *and they did not have much of a curriculum, just a few handouts here and there. At that time we were preparing our courses for inspection by the Registered Schools Board. I thought if the other faculties were documenting their courses then this would be a good opportunity for them to write the courses based on the textbooks. It was a good idea because the teachers were used to writing courses in their other subjects so they did the same in RE. It made a big difference. Teachers felt more confident and made demands on students and the students took*

RE more seriously as well. (J) Another REC belonged to a school where a textbook had been prescribed for every subject taught in the school. The inclusion of a textbook in religious education

promoted a school outlook where this subject was perceived as equal to other subjects:

> *The curriculum Years 7 – 12 was already using textbooks in each subject. In the early 1990s the staff had become familiar with having a textbook and everyone liked it. The staff members were used to using textbooks and they were also used to picking and choosing bits of chapters in the textbooks, and also incorporating other material. I think I am able to genuinely say that all the RE staff accepted the new textbooks very well and were able to implement a very good year 7 – 10 curriculum based on the textbooks. The textbooks helped to maintain credibility in RE with both the staff and the students. (C)*

The absence of clear directives regarding the implementation of the text-based curriculum from the archdiocese enabled the RECs to make decisions regarding how to develop and implement the curriculum. Arguably the life-centred approach was less effective in promoting religious education with the same rigour as other subjects.

The management strategies of several RECs responsible for implementing the text-based curriculum had an impact on school outlook towards religious education. In particular their management strategies focussed on achieving equal class time allocation for religious education, adopting uniform assessment procedures, documenting the curriculum and promoting the use of textbooks in the curriculum. The RECs who adopted these strategies perceived that doing so would promote a school outlook that regarded religious education as an equally credible subject within the school curriculum.

Conclusion

A grounded theory approach was used to gain insights into the REC's perceptions concerning the way they managed the change to a text-based curriculum. Such an approach has generally been used where no existing data exists on the phenomenon being studied (Glaser, 1998; Goulding, 2002). The perceptions of the RECs suggest issues such as staffing, working collaboratively with school leadership / executive teams and promoting religious education as a credible subject within the curriculum can influence school outlook regarding this subject. The RECs suggested that the issues explored in this paper needed to be addressed in order to manage the implementation of the text-based curriculum directed in the Melbourne archdiocese. The priority given to these issues was one way of perceiving

whether or not school outlook regarding religious education was favourable.

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