

THE REC: PERSPECTIVES ON A COMPLEX ROLE WITHIN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper surveys the complex nature of the role of the REC in Australian Catholic schools. It indicates perspectives about the role from two broad sources. The first source relates to the various policies written by several dioceses in Australia and the second emanates from the limited body of literature concerning the role. While it is the intention of the author to provide an overview of these perspectives, it is hoped that bringing such perspectives to the fore can assist policy makers in understanding the complex nature of the role. In so doing it may help them to develop policies and role descriptions, which enable RECs to exercise realistic religious leadership in Catholic schools.

Introduction

The role of REC is relatively new in Australian Catholic schools. It has evolved during the last twenty-five to thirty years (Crotty, 1998, p. 8; Fleming, 2001, p. 104). As the role continues to develop varying perceptions about the position have made it difficult to specify exactly what the role entails. This article examines perspectives concerning the role from two broad areas. The first viewpoint explores the role as reflected in the policies emanating from several dioceses throughout Australia. The second part of the paper explores relevant literature concerning understandings of the way(s) the role is exercised within a school context and understood within Catholic education. This paper brings to the fore understandings about the complex nature of this role within Catholic education. The insights presented in this paper are beneficial for any school or Catholic education office concerned with developing an effective and workable role description for the important position of religious education in a Catholic school.

What Do Some Diocesan Policies Suggest about the Role of the REC?

During the late 1970s and early 1980s Catholic Education Offices around Australia attempted to describe the role of RECs in policy statements. The role descriptions of RECs appear expansive and detailed (Fleming, 2002, p. 90) and indicate the growing complexity relating to the demands of the role.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the role continued to strengthen in the Archdiocese of Sydney (as well as other dioceses in Australia) and documents published by various Catholic Education Offices attempted to describe the role of the REC (Crotty, 1998, pp. 4-8; Catholic Education Office, Sydney,

1983; Catholic Education Office, Western Australia, 1986; Catholic Education Office Canberra and Goulburn, 1979). The 1983 handbook entitled *The REC* published by the Catholic Education Office in Sydney for the Archdiocese of Sydney, indicated that the role of the REC was essentially related to the development of curriculum planning, as well as to support, encourage and assist in the professional development of religious education teachers (pp. 10-13). By 1988 the role began to emerge as a position of leadership where "the REC, as a delegate of the principal, has the responsibility of providing leadership in the development of the religious education program within the school (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Sydney, 1988, p. 4). In 1989 leadership aspects of the position were expressed in terms of the development of religious education programs and outlined in a document entitled, *Religious Education: Its Place in Catholic Secondary Education* (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Sydney, 1989). This document focussed on the position of REC as one offering leadership in terms of ministry, religious education curriculum, the mission of the church, and Catholic ethos across the whole school curriculum (Crotty, 1998, p. 10).

By 1996 the role of REC was regarded as a significant position of leadership in both primary and secondary schools, particularly in the area of school policy and administration. The Catholic Education Office, Sydney also indicated that the role should be one of senior leadership within Catholic education and that representation on the school executive was essential.

While the principal has the responsibility to utilise the school executive in a way which best suits local

circumstances, it is expected that the Religious Education Coordinator (REC) will have a very real part to play in formulating the total school policy and in the general administration of the school. (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Sydney, 1996, p. 13).

In addition to the executive aspect of the role the REC together with the principal takes responsibility for developing an annual role description which outlines the key responsibilities based on four broad areas outlined in the document titled, *REC: Conditions of Appointment and Employment* (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Sydney, 1996). The four broad areas are outlined in section two of the document and relate to areas such as, leadership in the liturgical and faith life of the college, ensuring quality teaching and learning in the coordination of religious education programs, nurturing positive relationships in the school, and administering the organisational and record keeping aspects of the religious education program (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Sydney, 1996). Section four of the document, detailed selection criteria which applicants for the position of REC are required to meet in order to be considered for the position (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Sydney, 1996). With each document or policy the position has become more challenging.

In the Archdiocese of Hobart the role of the REC was understood within a context of an understanding of the ecclesial role of the teacher.

The REC holds a central position in the educational mission of the church, and as such shares the concern of the development and enrichment of the school, as a vital faith community. (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Hobart, 1984, p. 4).

Documents emerging from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) emphasised an understanding of teaching as a vocation. In the Second Vatican Council document titled, *Declaration of Christian Faith*, the role of teacher can be understood as a vocation.

Beautiful, therefore, and truly solemn is the vocation of all those who assist parents in fulfilling their task and who represent human society as well, by understanding the role of school teacher. This calling requires extraordinary qualities of mind and heart, extremely careful preparation, and constant readiness to begin anew to adopt (*Declaration of Christian Education*, 1967, #5; cited in Flannery, 1995).

The Archdiocese of Hobart has regarded the role of REC within an ecclesial context. It emphasised that integral to the role of the REC was the ability to assist teachers in fulfilling a vocation. Unlike other curriculum roles within the school the role of REC not only demanded professional competencies but also "a living commitment to the Catholic faith tradition [and] a living commitment to Catholic education" (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Hobart, 1984, p. 7).

The appointment of an REC in the Archdiocese of Hobart has been regarded as an appointment nominated by the principal of the school and ratified by the Director of Catholic Education (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Hobart, 1984, p. 2). The documents comment that:

the development and implementation of a coordinated sequential program of religion ... essential to the development of religious education programs are the planning of opportunities for reflection, prayer and liturgy which enable all to develop as people and to grow in their personal faith (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Hobart, 1984, p. 1).

According to the policy, the REC is responsible for the development of the religious education curriculum or classroom program, as well as pastoral care and personal development, liturgy and retreat programs, staff development, developing the Catholic ethos of the school and resource management (Catholic Education Office, 1984, pp. 2-6). However the overall responsibility of religious education within a school rests with the principal. The role of REC is a key position of "responsible leadership within the school community working with, but always accountable to the principal" (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Hobart, 1984, p. 2).

The 1984 document for the Archdiocese of Hobart, titled *The REC*, not only acknowledged the responsibility of the REC for the curriculum but also emphasised the importance of developing a sequential and complete program in religious education. "Working with the teachers who make up the religious education staff, the REC ensures a sequential and complete program of religious education throughout the school" (p. 9).

The Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Hobart, recommended in 1978 that each school appoint an REC. Given the complexity and demands of the role it is not surprising that it was not until 1993 that every school in the archdiocese had appointed a person to the position (Catholic

Education Office, Archdiocese of Hobart, 1984, p. 2).

In 1979 the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn published a document titled *The REC in Catholic Schools* and emphasised the importance of a professional approach to religious education and curriculum leadership by the REC (p. 15).

In the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn the role of REC is an appointment made by the principal of the school subject to the approval of the Director of Catholic Education. The position is a position of leadership in "the Catholic school and the school's apostolic mission of the church" (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, 1979, p. 1).

Integral to the role was the requirement that each appointee to the position will be a Catholic and a personal witness committed to Catholic faith and moral values. The REC is required to promote the Catholic ethos, inspire faith, share vision and build community as well as offer spiritual leadership. Furthermore the REC is responsible for managing resources, enriching learning and developing excellence in the religious education curriculum (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, 1979, pp. 1-5).

The appointment of an REC or an assistant principal (religious education) in the diocese of Darwin is made by the Director of Catholic Education and is subject to the approval of the bishop. The person appointed to the role must be an active member of the Catholic church and demonstrate by deed and example a strong commitment to the work of the church. The appointee is required to be a role model for teachers and be able to lead the prayer and liturgical life of the college and develop the school as a faith community. The role also requires the appointee to have approved tertiary qualifications in religious education, be a member of the school executive and coordinate religious education curriculum which promotes quality teaching and learning (Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Darwin, 1998, pp. 1-6).

Unlike many dioceses in Australia, the Archdiocese of Melbourne has no appointment policy concerning RECs that is binding on all schools. In 1995, the Catholic Education Office published an edition of the *Guidelines for Religious Education of Students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*. For the first time in the history of the archdiocese a statement concerning the role of the REC, in Catholic primary and secondary schools was published (Fleming, 2002, p. 110; see also Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Melbourne,

1995, pp. 20-22). *The Guidelines for Religious Education of Students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne (Melbourne Guidelines)* (Catholic Education Office, 1995) outlined the role of the REC under three broad areas; formation, curriculum and administration.

In the absence of a policy by the Catholic Education Office binding on all schools the role outlined in the *Melbourne Guidelines*, "appears to be intended to assist in the development of the role description at the school level" (Engebretson, 1998, p. 23). The *Melbourne Guidelines* suggested that the importance of the role charged each school to determine the role of the REC according to the needs of the particular school. Consequently, the role of the REC has particular significance and importance within the school and parish structure. It is, therefore, essential that schools and parishes clearly define the role of the REC in the light of their needs, expectations and profile, and within the school provide sufficient release time so that a clear vision of the Catholic school as an integral part of the church's mission is demonstrated (Catholic Education Office, 1995, p. 21).

The role of the REC outlined in the *Melbourne Guidelines* emphasised the role in theological terms. Church documents based on theological understandings of the role of the religious education teacher underpin the statements concerning the role of the REC. For example, in 1988 the *Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (RDECS) emphasised the importance of the role of the teacher of religious education in terms of being a personal witness to the faith tradition. While the document also emphasised the importance of the professional and pedagogical training in religious education it suggested that it was the personal witness of the teacher that brings the lesson to life (RDECS, 1988, #96). The essence of the theological understanding of the religious education teacher stemming from the RDECS (1988) was enshrined in the *Melbourne Guidelines*. Religious educators are called to be prophets and cooperate with parents in communicating the living mystery of God to their students. Ultimately, the school program depends on the staff who are both models and teachers of faith (Catholic Education Office, 1995, p. 20). Melbourne did not adopt a formal diocesan centralised policy outlining the role and conditions of employment as was common in many other dioceses within Australia. This approach did not appear to make it any easier to specify exactly what the role entails in the Archdiocese of Melbourne (Fleming, 2002).

The Archdiocese of Brisbane regarded the role as one of leadership and management. The role

statement for the Assistant Principal Religious Education (APRE) of a Catholic school provides for the leadership and management of quality Catholic schooling and growth and development of the APRE in the role (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Brisbane, 1997).

Fleming (2001) has indicated that focus on the role in terms of leadership and management in Brisbane is very different from that of ministry and formation in Melbourne. Fleming (2001) also suggested that the role of REC in the Archdiocese of Brisbane emphasised the educational dimension of the role.

The primary focus of the role is the enhancement of affective teaching and learning of students. The APRE has delegated responsibility for the leadership and coordination of the teaching of religion in the classroom. The APRE has shared responsibility for the religious life of the school community (Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Brisbane, 1997). The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia produced a handbook in 1986 titled *The Religious Education Coordinator* which emphasised the responsibility of the REC in implementing the religious education curriculum of the school in accordance with diocesan religious education guidelines (pp. 9-12).

In the Diocese of Parramatta the role has been described as a position of central leadership promoting the mission of the church as well as undertaking specific responsibilities described as – “The REC has a specific responsibility for learning programs, resources and the professional development of staff in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in religious education” (Catholic Education Office Parramatta, 1997, p. 1).

The policies emanating from several dioceses throughout Australia have presented various perceptions regarding the ecclesial and educational dimensions of the role of the REC. However none of the policies from the various dioceses surveyed in this article presents a common perception of the role. The different diocesan views suggest the difficulty associated with trying to specify exactly what the role entails. Some perspectives emanate from how the role is exercised within the school context and understood in Catholic education. Literature regarding this perspective has provided another insight into the complexities of the role.

Perceptions about the Role of the REC in the School Context as Understood within Catholic Education.

The analysis of approaches to the role of RECs in several dioceses in Australia has indicated that there is no clear uniform perception about the role. Policies about the role and responsibilities of RECs

can influence the priority and focus given to curriculum development and implementation, as well as other important aspects of the role. The professional standards set for appointing people to the role, say a great deal about the understanding of religious education as a curriculum area, which requires highly skilled leadership, and the priority it has within the curriculum (Engebretson, 1998, p. 25).

Johnson (1998) has categorised the responsibilities of the REC into six broad areas. The responsibilities are identified as leader of the religious education team, facilitator of school liturgy, convenor of staff development, curriculum leader, manager of religious education resources, and liaison person with parents and priests (Johnson, 1998, p. 44).

Collectively Catholic Education Offices have identified the above areas in most role descriptions documented by dioceses in Australia. The range of responsibilities attributed to an REC suggests that the role is not only complex but also very demanding. It could be argued that in order to fulfil one aspect of the role such as curriculum would be demanding in itself. The actual time and resources an REC may invest in curriculum development may compromise the effort put into other demands of the position.

Engebretson (1998) and Fleming (2001) have identified aspects of the role of REC in terms of leadership and management. Leadership is concerned with the development of vision, mission and possible future directions. Management, on the other hand, is concerned with designing and carrying out plans, achieving outcomes efficiently, and working effectively with people (Fleming, 2001, p. 111).

Leadership and the REC

The diocesan policies referred to in this article relating to the role of REC have suggested that it is a position of leadership. Fleming (1998) argued that very little literature exists focussing on “the specific nature of professional development of leaders of religious education in a school” (p. 15). Fleming (1998) suggested that the professional development of RECs occurred predominantly in the school context as a result of responding to school situations (p. 16). For example, in 2000, RECs in the Archdiocese of Melbourne became involved in the implementation of text-based curriculum in religious education. The absence of curriculum statements or study designs relating to the contents of the textbooks provided an opportunity for RECs to respond to the situation by exercising both leadership and management skills in the course of implementing a text-based curriculum.

Integral to the leadership aspect of the role of REC is the ability to inspire and motivate students, teachers and the school executive (Rymarz, 1998, p. 29).

In addition to the ability to inspire and motivate, D'Orsa (1998) has indicated another important quality required of a leader. It is the ability "to articulate the purpose and mission of the school" (p. 35). D'Orsa (1998) indicated that it is integral to building up the Catholic culture of the school, which is a shared responsibility of the REC. D'Orsa (1998) also argued that RECs were challenged to be teachers in religious education who are also "integrated educational leaders" (p. 36). An REC is required to demonstrate competencies in the area of leadership in religious education as well as other aspects of educational leadership. Sergiovanni (1992) has emphasised the importance of a leader demonstrating competence in the role. Referring specifically to the role of religious education Mackenzie (1998) has described the role as a position of leadership in religious education, education and executive leadership within the school.

RECs as Managers

In addition to the leadership aspect of the role is a management component. Engebretson (1998) has explored the role of RECs in Australian dioceses and indicated that the role is comprised of both leadership and management dimensions (p. 23). Fleming (2001) has indicated that the management role of the REC involves "carrying out plans, achieving outcomes efficiently, and working effectively with people" (p. 11). Rymarz (1998) argued that management also required informed understandings of educational theory and knowledge. "An important tool for the effective management of the curriculum is comprehensive knowledge of a number of complex areas of educational theory" (p. 29). Paxton (1998) emphasised the importance of knowledge and understanding in relation to management. "It is imperative that those who lead, manage and coordinate religious education have a clear understanding of this area as it relates to the Catholic school" (p. 47).

The importance that knowledge plays in the leadership and management role of an REC has been articulated in the policies of Catholic Education Offices throughout Australia. With the exception of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, the other dioceses mentioned in this article have stipulated a minimum qualification in religious education (Crotty, 1998, p. 9).

Curriculum Development and Leadership

Blahut and Bezzina (1998) have argued from an educational point of view that the responsibility of

RECs responsibility for curriculum should be a primary concern. However, they suggested that more time and energy appears to be invested into fulfilling other key responsibilities relevant to the role (p. 6). Engebretson (1998) suggested that while some of the curriculum tasks outlined in the *Melbourne Guidelines* are exclusive to religious education other aspects could apply to any subject area (p. 24).

Liddy (1998) explored the role from the perspective of RECs in several Australian dioceses and indicated that, "... there was a general consensus that the role as described in the Catholic Education Office (CEO) documents from each diocese was too big for one person to manage ..." (p. 27). The responsibility for the formal religious education curriculum is accurately understood when viewed in context with the demands of all the other responsibilities that come with the role. A summary of the roles of eighteen RECs on whom Liddy (1998) reported indicated that the role was too big for one person because it involved many aspects. It included such areas as curriculum development, pastoral care of staff and students, professional development, managing resources, coordinating the liturgical experiences, convening social justice experiences, faith formation programs for staff, and maintaining communication links with students, staff, parents, and the Catholic Education Office (Liddy, 1998, p. 27).

The curriculum is but one of the many areas where RECs are required to offer leadership. The literature has previously referred to the aspects of vision within a leadership role (Fleming, 2002, p. 11). Rymarz (1998) suggested, "vision is fed by knowledge" (p. 30). Knowledge of curriculum requires a "good deal of understanding about the theory of religious education" (Rymarz, 1998, p. 30). Mackenzie (1998) argued that there was a requirement of RECs to keep up-to-date with curriculum and pedagogy not only in the area of religious education but also all key learning areas. Rymarz (1998) suggested that RECs were concerned about the amount of time and energy spent on auditing the religious education curriculum against key curriculum documents (p. 28).

The ability of an REC to keep up with curriculum demands seems challenging enough without considering other areas of responsibilities associated with the role. Suggestions about the role being too big for one person (Liddy, 1998, p. 27) raise concerns about the ability of RECs to offer informed leadership in all areas relating to the role. Some of the literature concerning RECs referred to the rapid turnover of appointees to the position (Blahut & Bezzina, 1998, p. 3; Crotty, 1998, p. 10; Engebretson, 1998, p. 25; Rymarz, 1998, p. 31).

Unlike several other Catholic Education Office documents relating to the appointment and role of the REC, the *Melbourne Guidelines* make no mention about qualifications and experience as requirements for the position. The literature shows that even dioceses where criteria for the position are documented, young and relatively inexperienced teachers have tended to take up the role of REC (Blahut & Bezzina, 1998, p. 3; Crotty, 1998, p. 10).

Rymarz (1998, p. 31) and Engebretson (1998, p. 25) have indicated that the average employment span of the REC in Victorian Catholic schools is approximately two years. Blahut and Bezzina (1998) argue that the rapid turnover of appointees to the role of REC hinders a school's ability to promote quality religious education in Catholic schools (p. 6). They also suggest that the demands and complexities of the role cause teachers to 'burn out'.

Professional Development and Support to Staff

Malone and Ryan (1996) indicated that the REC is a person who directly supports teachers of religious education in their work (p. 5). Some RECs across several dioceses in Australia agreed that their role encompassed the professional development of religious education staff (Liddy, 1998, p. 27). Rymarz (1998) reported that skilled RECs with an understanding of their discipline could initiate professional development for religious education teachers (p. 30).

The professional development role in which the REC leads is a challenging one because religious education teachers have diverse and varying levels of competencies in terms of expertise and understandings about faith issues and knowledge in religious education. Rymarz (1998) provided an insight of teachers of religious education for whose professional development the REC is responsible. Just as students at Catholic schools now exhibit a wide diversity of backgrounds and expectations, the religious education (RE) staff can exhibit a variety of levels of knowledge and commitment to the faith

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and life of the church (p. 30). The levels can range from a minimum of knowledge about Catholic tradition to levels where teachers have gained tertiary qualifications in religion and theology (Thomas, 2000). The diversity in terms of backgrounds and expectations of the religious education can make it difficult for the REC to provide professional development experiences for teachers of religious education where there "is the lack of a clearly identifiable Catholic population and a sense of shared values (Mackenzie, 1998, p. 39).

Personality of the REC

D'Orsa (1998) has identified some key personality traits that would be helpful for an REC in the process of implementing curriculum innovations and other aspects of the role. In the human domain the REC is required to build up the quality and morale of teachers of religious education by providing support, and by listening and challenging (p. 34). Liddy (1998) has indicated that the personality of the REC shapes the job within the school (p. 27). Rymarz (1998) suggested that "RECs who can connect good professional knowledge and behaviour with strong human values are much more likely to inspire students and teachers" (p. 29).

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this article it has been my intention to present perspectives of the role of the REC from two broad areas. An investigation of various diocesan policies and literature concerning the role of the REC within the Catholic school, suggests that the role is considerably complex and demanding. This insight into the complex nature of the role can assist those who are responsible for the development of religious leadership policies. It can help them to be more in touch with the intricate demands faced by RECs. A commitment to the task of knowing and understanding the complexities of the role may help to develop policies and role descriptions which enable RECs to exercise realistic religious leadership in Catholic schools.

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