

Some Years 10-12 students' perceptions and experiences of their religious education programs: Implications for curriculum development and planning

Introduction

The nature and purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools has continued to be the subject of much interest and discussion. Contributors to the field operate out of varied contexts and concerns which reflect different understandings of the nature and purpose of the subject. This has been influenced, as much, by the cultural, political and technological changes in society as by reforms that were introduced at the wider school curriculum level which have been a response to new knowledge about the learning process and a focus on the individual student's growth and development.

In the nineties, in my doctoral studies I investigated students' and teachers' perceptions of the Year 12 religious education program to discover how appropriate the programs were in meeting the needs of the students and in achieving the aims of religious education for senior secondary students in Victorian Catholic schools. The findings from my doctoral study raised many concerns about the practice of Year 12 classroom religious education. In particular, it noted that the emphasis given to knowledge and content, that is, the cognitive elements reflected by the work requirements and CATS (at that time), were perceived as a negative factor for a large majority of students. In general, over half of the students surveyed felt that their faith and spiritual lives were not nurtured through the classroom programs. Despite the focus on cognitive learning, there was also evidence that a significant number of students perceived RE to lack an intellectual challenge and felt they had learnt little about the faith tradition.

Drawing on the findings of this study, I proposed some guiding principles which were aimed at informing the development of new religious education programs for senior students and some of these principles have been reflected in new programs, particularly in relation to utilizing a range of up-to-date teaching and learning activities and resources and some recognition given to the nurturing of students' spirituality.

In the intervening years between 1995 (when I conducted my survey) and 2006, there have been many developments in religious education. While the VCE religion study units have continued to attract a number of students, the textbook curriculum, aimed at promoting religious literacy, has become well established for P-12 in the Melbourne Archdiocese. As well, the Melbourne texts have been used as resources in the other Victorian dioceses. Finally, a new Religious Education Curriculum using a flexible Shared Praxis approach was introduced in each of the Victorian country dioceses in 2005. As well, a new curriculum framework was developed for use with the *To know, worship, love* textbooks in Melbourne in 2006. Accordingly, it was an appropriate time to replicate my previous study to examine the perceptions of Years 10-12 students in 2007 to discover if the programs were meeting their needs and promoting their knowledge of, and perhaps, their interest and participation in the Catholic religious tradition.

Therefore, this study, which was funded by a Bishop's Research Grant in the Victorian dioceses, aimed to replicate and extend part of the earlier study. It surveyed Years 10-12 students in Catholic schools, across the four Victorian dioceses, in the third term of 2007 to discover their perceptions

and experiences of current practices in religious education to determine if their perceived religious and spiritual needs were being catered for.

Curriculum frameworks in Religious Education – Melbourne Archdiocese

By 2007, the secondary Religious Education (RE) textbook curriculum in the Melbourne Archdiocese, which was introduced in 2000, had been reviewed. This led to a new curriculum framework being designed which aimed at assisting RE teachers to make effective use of the textbooks *To know, worship and love*. The curriculum documents for Year 7-10 were entitled: *Coming to know, worship and love: A Religious Education Curriculum Framework for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (2005). In the letter at the front of the document, Archbishop Dennis Hart stated:

This curriculum framework fulfils two aims. Firstly it has been designed to enhance the use of the student's texts *To know, worship and love*. Secondly it responds to the educational demands of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). In fulfilling both of these aims *Coming to know worship and love* will provide Catholic schools with a rich and engaging curriculum supported by high quality student text books (p iii).

Possibly, one of the significant differences between the new curriculum approach and that described in the previous Teaching Companion is the recognition that learning needs to be extended beyond the cognitive level or the gaining of knowledge. While there were cognitive and affective learning outcomes provided in different units of work in the previous textbook curriculum, the links between the activities and outcomes were often ambiguous.

The new revised curriculum framework (*Coming to know, worship and love: A Religious Education Curriculum Framework for Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* 2005), however, discusses the theoretical aspects of theology and pedagogy in the context of the Emmaus story from Luke's Gospel which involve the processes of coming to know (informed), experiencing Jesus in sacrament and worship (formed) and returning with love (transformed). This process would imply that a spiritual dimension is being recognized (p.3) and this is stated in the section referring to the dimensions of Religious Education:

- i) Religious knowledge and understanding
- ii) Reasoning and responding
- iii) Personal and communal commitment (see, for instance, p. 5 in *Coming to know, worship and love: A Religious Education Curriculum Framework for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, Year 8*).

This third dimension refers to the

nurturing of the spiritual life, the importance of belonging to the faith community and engagement in community service. It is within this dimension that the Religious Education curriculum extends beyond the classroom to include retreats, the sacramental life of the Church, community service, leadership formation and contribution to civic and faith communities (p. 5).

What is evident from this description is that spirituality has been framed within a religious context so that expressions of the spiritual life pertain to expressions associated with religiosity. This, of course, has been one of the ways spirituality has been interpreted within western Christianity for many years and it does not necessarily reflect contemporary research and understandings about spirituality, that is, that spirituality is an innate human quality – the relationality of being (see for instance, Groome 1998; Harris & Moran, 1998, Hyde, 2008, Miller & Nakagawa, 2002); it is about the connectedness an individual feels to Self and everything other than Self which, in turn, helps the

individual find meaning and purpose in their life experiences. This is an important consideration in contemporary society where, for many young people, there may not always be an obvious religious dimension to their spiritual expression (see for instance, Tacey, 2003).

Returning to the three dimensions as described in the curriculum document, the outcomes associated with each unit of work are articulated as indicators of learning under the headings: Values and Attitudes, Knowledge and Skills. Within these categories, there is scope for the spiritual dimension to be addressed but, in fact, many of the verbs provided in the values and attitudes statements are related to skills rather than inner learning or reflective experience of Self in relation to Other. For instance, in a unit on Jesus at Year 8 (Unit 5), the following indicators of learning are an example of what is offered under Values and Attitudes:

Articulate those qualities of Jesus which are an example for Christian living

Consider the Great Commandment as a guiding principle in Jesus' ministry (this is one which could lead to inner reflection if teachers guided students to consider what this actually might mean for them and their way of perceiving and being in the world)

Discuss the power of Jesus to influence the lives of those he encountered

And so on.

A spiritual learning outcome, instead, would provide an opportunity (which would require time and particular resources and activities) for students to consider *what the teachings of Jesus means to them; How do they see themselves in the context of Jesus' teachings? And, is there anything about their lives that they may change as a result of their learning in the unit?* Of course, in some classrooms, these aspects may be addressed. However, if such an outcome is not articulated, there is a good chance that this level of learning may not occur and that the teacher will focus on the stated outcomes such as those identified above.

It would appear, therefore, that while the new RE curriculum in the Melbourne Archdiocese has acknowledged the spiritual dimension of the student, the activities related to this are not the main focus of the classroom but extend beyond it. Such an approach does reflect the intention of RE as articulated in many Church documents. For instance, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988) and *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) describe RE as a subject to be taught with the same rigour as other disciplines - a scholastic discipline that honours the "distinction and complementarity" of religious education and catechesis". However, such an approach does not consider the implications of contemporary literature which examines the spiritual dimension of learning within all classrooms (for instance, see Moffett, 1995; Miller, 2000; Miller & Nakagawa, 2002; Palmer, 1983, 1998 among others).

Curriculum Framework – Victorian country dioceses

In 2005, the new religious education curriculum documents were released in the Victorian country diocese. This was the result of a three-year collaborative project of curriculum development authorised by the Bishops of Ballarat, Sale and Sandhurst and the Archbishop of Hobart. The purpose of the project was to provide a set of resources for learning and teaching in Religious Education for use in Catholic schools (*Awakenings*, 2005, p. 11).

The religious education curriculum developed in the Inter-diocesan Project was based on an adaptation of the pedagogy of Groome's (1980, 1991) Shared Christian Praxis which aimed to inform, form and transform, thereby implying a spiritual dimension in the learning (through transformation). The Praxis approach recognized six movements:

- Focusing

- Naming
- Reflecting Critically
- Accessing the Christian Story and Vision
- Understanding and Integrating
- Responding.

After the initial collaboration, each Victorian country diocese individualized its curriculum and named it accordingly:

Ballarat – *Awakenings*

Sale – *Journeying together in Hope*

Sandhurst – *Source of Life*

The documents are a result of extensive consultation and provide some excellent ideas and advice. They are also responsive to the contemporary situation where many young teachers require in-depth knowledge about the faith tradition. Consequently, there are carefully planned details about the discipline of religious education presented in the core documents from each of the dioceses: the aims, the context, the curriculum structure, the relationship to other curriculum areas and quality teaching, assessment and reporting. The core documents are complemented by teaching resources that have been progressively developed in the ensuing years. For instance, the Sale diocese has a publication on teaching strategies which reflect many of the curriculum initiatives, models and approaches through the past decade. In general, the curriculum structure in all three core documents is outcomes based and the categories of Knowledge and Skills and Values and Attitudes form the basis for learning outcomes. Again, there is discussion about faith development but not about spiritual development. However, there is an implicit intention that the spirituality of the student will be addressed through the Shared Praxis process of inform, form and transform.

Since the new/revised curricula for each diocese has been gradually introduced into schools over 2005/6, this research project is timely as it seeks to examine the initial impact of the new and revised curricula through students' perceptions of their learning experiences in the RE program.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to discover Year 10-12 students' perceptions and experiences of the effects of the religious education program. To this end, they were asked, as a result of their religious education program, which may incorporate either or both school based and VCE units of work, to what extent they agree or disagree with a number of items included in a questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was designed to take approximately 35-40 minutes to complete.

The research instrument for data collection was a questionnaire that had been used in the previous study but with appropriate amendments for the contemporary context. Amendments were made in consultation with religious education personnel from the different Catholic Education offices. The sub-questions that generated the items for the questionnaire were:

Does the senior secondary religious education program:

1. *increase students' interest in different religions and their understanding and appreciation of the role of religion;*
2. *promote the knowledge and understanding of the key practices and beliefs of Christian communities;*
3. *increase students' interest and involvement in the Catholic faith tradition and the importance of religion in their lives;*

4. *provide students with learning experiences that have the potential to nurture their faith and spiritual development;*
5. *offer content and learning experiences that are relevant, meaningful and intellectually challenging for students from a contemporary pluralist society, and*
6. *achieve appropriate status and recognition of its specific contribution to the broad curriculum?*

The questionnaire included closed and open questions thereby allowing some flexibility in the responses and Likert scales were used to indicate the degree of agreement to various statements. The responses were quantified and an SPSS software program was used to generate statistical evidence –and frequency tables were used to present summaries of the data.

In discussion with the staff in Religious Education at each of the Catholic Education offices, 15 schools were invited to participate in the research. Affirmative responses were received from seven schools. Due to a delay in the process for the Ethics clearance, the administering of the questionnaire was delayed so that most of the Year 12 students were unable to participate in the project. In the end, the final number of participants was 401, made up mostly of Years 10 and 11 students from seven schools across the four dioceses. The schools were numbered from 100 – 700 and Table 1 shows the spread of students from each school.

Table 1 – Participants from Schools

Schools	Frequency
100	70
200	20
300	35
400	34
500	90
600	77
700	75
Total	401

Part A Section 1 - Role and importance of religion

The first area that was investigated was students' interest in different religions and their understanding and appreciation of the role of religion. Approximately 49% of students agreed that, as a result of their religious education program they had developed an appreciation of religion and its role in their lives while 34% remained uncertain. However, two-thirds of the students, 75%, indicated that they understood how religion influenced customs and practices of people and 70% of students agreed that, as a result of their religious education program, they had developed an understanding of the importance of religion in the lives of many Australians from different cultural backgrounds.

In general, then, half of the students indicated that they had developed an interest and appreciation in the role of religion in their own lives as a result of their religious education program. As well, a large majority of students had developed their understanding and appreciation of the role and importance of religion in other people's lives. This is an important consideration given the pluralist nature of contemporary society and the emerging evidence of some forms of religious divisiveness in recent years.

The second sub-question focused on the promotion of knowledge and understanding of key practices and beliefs of Christian communities and 74% of students provided positive responses to items related to this question. However, a minority of students, 42% and 38% respectively, felt that (i) their faith in Jesus had developed and that (ii) his teachings were meaningful to their lives.

The next responses focused on spirituality, involvement in social justice and understanding the big questions in life. These were included as evidence of Christian belief and practice and were relevant to the relational dimension of the individual. Approximately 56% of the students perceived that their own spirituality had developed; 40% were interested in social justice programs and 43% showed a positive response to understanding the big questions.

The findings so far present a mixed overview. A majority clearly perceived that their knowledge of the faith tradition had increased but less than half felt that the RE program had any impact on their faith development. This does raise some questions about the appropriateness of the classroom as an avenue for faith development or whether classroom programs should focus only on the educational aspects of RE. These are questions that have continued to attract different points of view.

Further findings showed that less than half of the respondents showed any interest in social justice programs and a small majority felt that their spirituality had developed as a result of their experiences in the program. The first finding, here, could be a generational feature that implies that, for any number of reasons, young people today are less concerned about supporting social justice programs. It could be that the context of young people's lives is so demanding and all-consuming that they have little time left for other concerns. Or it could be that the pace of change has reached such proportions that their mental and emotional abilities are concentrated on 'keeping up' so that their spiritual strengths in terms of the depth of the connectedness they may feel to Other may have become somewhat diminished. Whatever the cause, this finding does point to the need for further research.

Another focus concerned involvement in the Church community and, here, a minority, 21%, were positive about being involved in the Church community or youth groups and a slightly larger percentage, 34%, were positive about the need for continued involvement in the Church once they had left school. In general, then, less than a third of the students, as a result of their religious education program were interested in involvement in the church community beyond school. It is pertinent here to observe, that these findings reflect the results of recent National church Life Surveys (for instance, see Gilchrist, 2004) which indicated that a minority of young people, in general, are involved in their parish or in church life, and indeed, this lack of participation from young people mirrors a global phenomenon in the Western world. Therefore, it is not surprising to find this result in this research study and it, probably, has little to do with the religious education programs and more to do with societal and cultural pressures and influences.

The next focus, and one which is very relevant to contemporary pluralist societies, was interest in and tolerance of different religions. The findings were that 52% of the students were positive about learning about different religions and 71% were more tolerant towards other religions. This is a useful finding given the religious divisiveness that has become evident in the wider society since 9/11 and highlights the benefits of the religious education program in raising awareness and tolerance of different religious cultures. Finally, 61% of students responded that they perceived religious education as being a lifelong learning process.

Overall, it can be seen that there were some positive results from this section of the questionnaire. However, the findings do highlight some areas that require further attention.

Part A Section 2 – Delivery of the classroom program

Section 2 aimed to investigate aspects related to the delivery of the classroom religious education program. The items in the questionnaire related to seven broad areas:

- RE is an important subject;
- RE is intellectually challenging
- RE is interesting and relevant
- RE should be optional
- Teaching/Learning strategies/activities
- Use of prayer and liturgy
- Retreats and reflection days

RE is an important subject.

Table 2 shows the spread of responses (in percentages) to these items. Fifty-six per cent of students perceived RE as important but only 18% spent as much time studying RE while 38% came prepared for class. Twenty-nine percent believed that RE contributed to their lifelong learning.

Table 2 – Importance of RE

	RE is important (%)	Equal study time (%)	Prepared for class (%)	Lifelong learning (%)
SA	20	5	6	5
A	36	13	32	24
U	17	10	23	33
D	16	28	23	22
SD	11	44	16	16
Total	100	100	100	100

In general, then, a small majority of students perceived RE as an important subject but a large majority did not spend as much time studying for RE or coming to class, prepared for the lesson. These latter findings have some implications for the next finding where 68% of students found RE easier than other subjects while 51% did not find RE intellectually challenging.

These results while they are not overly positive about the intellectual challenge of RE are, in fact, an improvement on the findings from the earlier study. However, they also indicate that this is an area of ongoing concern for RE curriculum planners and classroom teachers.

The next area also has some links to the previous one that is whether students perceived RE to be interesting and relevant. Table 3 (p. 51) presents the corresponding spread of responses and shows that 34 % of students disagreed that RE was boring; 36% were interested in class work; 43% disagreed that RE had little meaning for students and 33% felt that RE was interesting for senior students. Another 49% agreed that students were disinterested and disruptive during RE class, and 29% found that the topics were relevant for them. Finally, on a personal level, 51% found RE interesting. Importantly, there were quite significant numbers who responded that they were uncertain about these items.

Table 3 - RE is interesting and relevant

	Boring (%)	Interested in class work (%)	Has little meaning (%)	Little interest for seniors (%)	Usually interested (personal) (%)	Disinterested and Disruptive (%)	Topics not relevant (%)
SA	16	5	17	11	12	19	10
A	18	27	20	20	39	30	31
U	22	32	20	36	23	21	30
D	30	20	32	25	16	24	17
SD	14	16	11	8	10	6	12
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

The next area related to teaching and learning strategies/activities. Table 4 shows that 36% of students felt that there was a balance between written and practical activities; 34% perceived the resources to be stimulating and up-to-date; and 64% responded that there was variety in the learning activities.

Table 4 - Teaching and learning activities

	Balance between written and practical activities (%)	Stimulating and up-to-date resources (%)	Variety in learning activities (%)
SA	9	11	23
A	27	23	41
U	25	42	25
D	21	17	8
SD	18	7	3
Total	100	100	100

In general, these findings about the teaching and learning activities had a mix of responses apart from the response about the variety of learning activities where there was a positive response from a clear majority. The responses about prayer and liturgy in the class program were less positive and have some implications for this area of the RE learning program. Twenty-four per cent of students agreed that attending class masses helped them to pray, 21% felt that there should be more opportunities for class prayer and 18% felt that preparing liturgies brought them closer to God.

The responses to retreat and reflection days were also mixed where 54% of students agreed that retreats and reflection days nurtured their faith and spirituality but a fewer number, 37%, felt that reflection days took up important study time.

Further responses which related to teaching and learning strategies showed that 68% of students enjoyed discussions, 65% thought it was important to have guest speakers and 40% found RE class uninteresting.

In addition, 65% of students agreed that some learning activities in RE had made them reflect on their own personal and spiritual growth and these referred to watching films/videos; reflection days;

retreats; going to chapel; and studying social and ethical issues. On the negative side there were a minority of responses that indicated that their learning in RE had resulted in them reflecting on their personal and spiritual growth.

Finally, students were required to indicate on a scale from 1 – 5, specific learning activities in terms of how helpful each was. Table 5 presents these responses through *Most helpful*, *Somewhat helpful*, *Possibly helpful*, *Not very helpful* and *Least helpful*.

Table 5 – helpful learning strategies

	Most helpful %	Somewhat helpful %	Possibly helpful %	Not very helpful %	Least helpful %	No response %	Total%
Discussions	46	25	14	6	7	2	100
Mass preparation	2	11	23	20	24	20	100
Written assignments	8	24	31	18	15	4	100
Oral presentations	9	17	25	19	17	13	100
Community work	23	16	14	10	7	30	100
Films, DVDs, Visuals & Music resources	43	25	12	8	8	4	100
Role play/drama	19	16	16	15	13	21	100
Research activities	14	25	29	14	13	5	100
Meditation	29	14	15	11	10	21	100
Prepared talk/tutorial	10	16	25	19	13	17	100
Retreats	40	17	11	7	7	18	100
Pastoral programs for junior students	14	12	19	13	10	32	100
Prayer formal/informal	9	17	26	19	18	11	100
Guest speakers	18	25	20	12	10	15	100
Reflection days	28	17	17	10	12	16	100
Web quests/faith quest	5	8	18	12	14	43	100

The findings show that discussions were perceived by 46% of the students as most helpful followed by Films/DVDs, Visuals & Music Resources (43%) and Retreats (40%). Twenty-nine percent agreed that meditations were helpful with 28% indicating reflection days and 23% choosing community work. Moving to the least helpful activities, 24% indicated Mass preparation followed by 18% for prayer activities. Other activities perceived as least helpful were oral presentations (17%), written

assignments (15%), web quests or faith quests (14%) and role plays/drama, research activities and prepared talks/tutorials (13%).

To sum up, then, there were mixed responses to aspects related to teaching and learning and were similar to the findings from the earlier study.

The final sections of the questionnaire required responses that provided an overview of the program. These showed that 62% indicated that, as a result of their religious education program, they understood the message of Jesus, 40% agreed that they lived out the message of Jesus and 30% responded that they included prayer in their daily lives. Certainly, the first finding here was a positive response from a majority of students.

Discussion

The findings of this study do show that in some areas the religious education program is achieving its aim for a majority of students. However, they highlight areas that do require further consideration.

One of the more positive findings was that a large majority of students indicated that they had developed their understanding and appreciation of the role and importance of religion in people's lives. As well, while just on half of the students showed an interest in learning about other religions, a good majority indicated that, as a result of their religious education program, they had become more tolerant towards other religions. This response showed a positive impact of the religious education program. It is also an important factor in a contemporary world where religious divisiveness has become a significant issue.

A second factor was that a good majority clearly indicated that their knowledge of the faith tradition had increased although this knowledge appeared not to have increased faith development or promoted an interest in social justice which may be seen as related areas. As well, only a small majority felt that their spirituality had developed as a result of their experiences in the program. One implication of this latter finding could be the need to examine contemporary understandings of spirituality which has implications for ways in which the spiritual dimension of learning can be addressed. For instance, this would involve examining multisensory approaches to teaching content through a selection of particular resources and activities, and perhaps, adapting the learning environment to include periods of silence and stillness, and to promote integration, connectedness and inclusivity.

In general, less than a third of the students were interested in involvement in the church community beyond school. This does have serious implications for the future of Catholic communities and indeed, for the character and identity of future Catholic schools. As indicated earlier, however, this is a much bigger societal and cultural issue rather one that is specific to the religious education program and, as such, needs to be addressed at the wider level.

While a small majority of students perceived RE as an important subject, a little more than half of the students did not find RE an intellectually challenging subject. This latter finding was reflected in the fact that a large majority did not spend as much time studying for RE or coming to class prepared for the lesson. These findings do present further challenges to RE curriculum planners and educators to find ways in which to show students why the subject is important and how it contributes to their lifelong learning. They also do present an area of concern as they suggest that despite the strong cognitive focus which has dominated much of the RE curriculum in the past decade in some of the dioceses, nearly half of the students did not appear to find it an intellectually challenging subject.

While a majority of students indicated that RE classes were not interesting and that the topics were not relevant this could have something to do with the influences of their peers and the fact that religion and RE is often seen as counter-cultural to society. As such, there are ongoing challenges for RE teachers to find new and illuminating ways in which they can show how the content of RE may be made meaningful to students' lives particularly in relation to their lifelong learning. This also relates to the fact that only a minority of students were positive about aspects related to teaching and learning. In a culture where young people have had their lives contextualized by instant gratification, ongoing entertainment via small and large screens, and activities that require a short concentration span, the challenge to find ways to engage students and to maintain their interest so that transformative learning can take place is huge. Once again, research about the spiritual dimension of learning which requires time, stillness, silence as well as activities, resources and environments that engage a student through multi-sensory learning has enormous relevance here. There would seem to be a distinct need for RE planners and educators to become familiar with such research and writings to further enhance their work in RE classrooms.

One further area that raises some concern is that only a small majority were positive about their retreat experience. It certainly suggests that retreats as a learning experience may need to be examined and evaluated so that the planning becomes responsive to the needs and interests of a new generation.

Conclusion

In the contemporary pluralistic and secular context of society, religious education continues to pose some difficulty for educators who attempt to engage young people within a context that, at many levels, appears to de-value religion. Accordingly, it presents significant challenges for religious educators who try to nurture the Catholic identity of their students who, potentially, will provide future leadership in the Church. While it is vital that students leaving Catholic classrooms are grounded in their Catholic identity and are armed with a sound knowledge of their faith tradition, it is equally important, that they are nurtured in their spirituality which engenders their wellbeing and an openness to exploring relevant and meaningful questions. These are areas that most religious educators would readily identify as significant and many are constantly seeking new ways of addressing them.

Further, against a political backdrop that has generated certain levels of religious divisiveness, in the multi-faith and multicultural context of today, a positive finding of this research was that students indicated that they had developed their understanding of the role of religion and how it could affect the beliefs and practices of many people. Certainly, it suggests that there is a place for activities which would nurture the relationality of the student, that is, their spiritual nature, through not just learning about Other but actually seeking engagement with and inclusion of Other. Such experiences should lead to greater tolerance, engagement and empathy which, in turn, may build a more harmonious and cohesive society with acceptance and inclusivity as foundational principles.

In the end, the findings of this study suggest that the evaluation of religious education programs should include an examination of the perceptions and experiences of students themselves. These perceptions, then, would complement the perceptions and experiences of curriculum planners, religious educators and religious education classroom teachers and provide more rounded information about classroom practice. Accordingly, this could lead to necessary amendments/extensions to ensure that programs achieve their aims for a large majority of students; that educators continue to find ways in which the Catholic identity of school communities may be enhanced particularly where there may be multiple expressions of Catholic identity; and how the spirituality and religiosity of their students may be nurtured in pluralist contexts.

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