Article

Religious Education in Australia: The Voices of Practitioners and Scholars

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Abstract: Religious education (RE) in Australia is challenged to support the religious and spiritual needs of Australia's religiously plural student population. Within a national colloquium, practitioners and scholars (N = 57) gathered to discern ways forward in RE. Data were collected from small and whole group discussions reported across three days of integrated reflection on themes of Awaken, Celebrate, and Imagine. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and Leximancer were used to analyse the respective data which confirmed domains of focus on Day 1 of Formation, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Partnerships, and Research. Day 2 (Celebrate) explored these domains and identified Themes and Theoretical Propositions that advanced each domain. Day 3 (Imagine) underlined foundations in faith for each domain and detailed generic propositions and themes. Propositions included advancing RE through Formation (being attentive to personal readiness, curriculum intention, and school identity), Pedagogy (engaging practices of inquiry, experiential learning, and encounter-based opportunities), Curriculum (characterised as inclusive, relevant, and life-giving), Partnerships (strengthening inclusion and engagement with family, parish, and community), and Research (integrating evidence-based practice).

Keywords: Australia; Catholic; religious education; plurality; theoretical propositions; practitioners and scholars

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Context

Catholic schools in Australia are distinct faith-based institutions classified by the Commonwealth and State governments as non-government schools. These schools offer parents and caregivers an alternative in education, grounded in justice and resource allocation, to support high-quality education informed by a faith tradition with the purposes of advancing integral human development and community flourishing. Catholic schools are inclusive, striving to meet national education goals and expectations from the government, the Church, and the community. Within legislative, statutory, and Church frameworks, these faith-based schools prioritise integrating educational theory and practice, developing quality curriculum programs, and fostering inclusive school cultures. This involves addressing curriculum preferences, religious dimensions, and the diverse religious affiliations and practices of staff and students.

1.2. Sector Profile

The 2021 Australian census revealed a significant shift in religious demographics: Christians now comprise 43.9% of the population, down from 52.2% in 2016. The Catholic community, specifically, has declined to 19.9% from 22.6% in 2016. Overall, 60.3% of Australians associate with a religion, while 38.9% report 'no religion' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

Currently, four million students are enrolled in Australian schools, with the majority in government schools (2.6 million, 66%), followed by Catholic schools (0.7 million, 18.2%)

and independent schools (0.6 million, 16%) (Independent Schools Australia 2021). Catholic school enrolments peaked at 19.3% in 2013 but have since declined to 18.2% (Independent Schools Australia 2021).

The religious profile of students and staff in Catholic schools has evolved. The National Catholic Education Commission (2016) states that 69% of students are Catholic, while 31% are from other religious backgrounds. In Catholic secondary schools, 33% of students are of other faith traditions or no tradition compared to 29% in primary schools. Among staff, 80% of primary and 61% of secondary school teachers identify as Catholic, though only 25% of these engage in regular worship and parish leadership (National Catholic Education Commission 2016). Data representing Catholic schools administered by Arch/Diocesan governing authorities indicate that 58.3% of students and 70.8% of teachers in 2023 are Catholic. This dramatic and evolving demographic shift raises questions about the ability of staff to support the school's mission of integral human development and community flourishing within a faith tradition (Congregation for Catholic Education 1997; National Catholic Education Commission 2018; Sultmann and Hall 2022) in a context where student enrolments demonstrate an increase in religious pluralism and or no religious affiliations. This challenge is particularly evidenced in the curriculum domain of religious education.

1.3. Research and Practice Trajectories

Religious education (RE) in Catholic schools faces unique challenges influenced by global trends towards inclusivity, pluralism, and secularism. Traditionally, RE aimed to foster lifelong faith among Catholics. However, the evolving student and staff profiles now reflect a broader community service model and an emphasis on academic achievement (Barnes 2022; Wodon 2021).

International research highlights varying contexts for the teaching of RE, each of which possesses their own challenges. For example, in the Netherlands, religious identity in schools is contested due to diverse social and religious perspectives (van Dijk-Groeneboer 2019). In Germany, confessional RE is mandated, but increasing religious diversity has led to alternative ethics courses for non-participating students (Barb 2019). The US mandates the teaching of world religions within history and geography courses to enhance religious literacy and intercultural understanding, though these are critiqued for their superficiality and insufficient teacher training (National Council for the Social Studies 2017; Barb 2019). In the UK, RE faces sustainability and marginalisation issues, with debates on whether to revise traditional models or develop new disciplinary approaches (Barnes 2020). Despite these challenges, RE's role in fostering a tolerant, cohesive society remains crucial (Barnes 2014). Effective RE curricula should integrate educational soundness, social support, and the school's historical and traditional context (Braten 2021).

Balancing long-held religious practices with diverse cultures and worldviews requires viewing RE as a process, with teachers acting as companions to students in theological reflection and dialogue (Roebben 2021; Pollefeyt 2013). It is argued that contemporary RE initiatives emphasise correlation, inclusion, interpretation, character education, narration, performance, and spirituality (Roebben 2021). Key to this transition are practices ensuring policy alignment, academic rigour, and contextual stability (Skeie 2021). Rossiter (2018) calls for a rethinking of RE to address changing religious practices, social pluralism, institutional shifts, and psychological constructs. This requires a comprehensive framework that respects tradition while responding to social and educational needs.

The curriculum in Catholic schools aims to meet individual, social, and community needs, guided by principles of equity and excellence (Education Council 2019). The NCEC interprets these principles through Christ-centred goals (National Catholic Education Commission 2018). Contemporary RE must authentically present the Good News in relevant and innovative ways (Roebben 2019). The International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV) underscores the need for a fresh language for faith, realistic practices, recognition of diversity, and alignment with human rights (Francis 2023; Grumme 2023; Skeie 2023; Kuusisto 2023; ter Avest et al. 2023). Against this backdrop, a national

gathering was held to explore the current state of religious education in Australia, focusing on ways forward in religious education that recognised the intentions and achievements of historical efforts while being open and reflective to renewing RE that addresses the needs of a religiously plural or non-engaged student population.

1.4. Perspectives of Practitioners and Scholars

Catholic school identity is rooted in the Gospel, Church traditions, and community engagement. The school operates under the guidance of the Magisterium and local Church authority in maintaining their Gospel and ecclesial traditions within the curriculum and community life that they experience (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022). The process of engagement and reflection and engagement is characterised as one of coming together and being open and informed by the Spirit. The adoption of the principle of synodality is a public expression of the work of the Spirit guiding deliberations and reflective processes. The concept of synodality combines the processes of coming together (*syn*) and being open to the presence of the Spirit (*hodos*). It is an inductive way of 'discovering with amazement that the Holy Spirit always surprises us, suggesting fresh paths and new ways of speaking' (Arbuckle 2024, p. 101). Synodality is based on respectful listening, collegiality in intention, shared beliefs as a basis of solidarity, and participation underpinned by dialogue.

> The twin actions of encounter and dialogue act as a bridge for multicultural and multifaith perspectives in a pluralistic society. Every Christian is called to go out to others—to dialogue with those who do not think the way they do, with those who have another faith, or who don't have faith. To encounter all, because we all have in common our having been created in the image of God. We can go out to encounter everyone without fear (Pope Francis reported in Reese 2013, para. 2).

And,

> Dialogue is the interaction between people where each aims to present themselves authentically and seeks to understand the other as they truly are, forming an I-Thou relationship. This relationship is characterised by mutuality, openness, and directness. The 'I' relates to the 'Thou' not as something to be studied, measured, or manipulated, but as an irreplaceable presence that responds to the 'I' in its individuality (Arbuckle 2024, p. 101).

The purpose of the national gathering was to dialogue on the status and opportunities for advancing religious education in Catholic schools across Australia. The overall theme was ways forward in religious education, with sub-themes of identifying challenges and future directions, embracing opportunities, and imagining possibilities. The process was envisioned as sharing perspectives supportive of an imagination for RE that was attentive to the diversity and circumstances of all students. In addition, changes in community and parent expectations, pedagogy, curriculum, and technology situate RE in a context which highlights the advantages of collaborative partnerships, collective reflection, and strategic intention in service and communion of a common mission. The overall aim of the national gathering was therefore the exploration of RE through drawing upon the collective expertise of practitioners and scholars in the field. The three research questions were:

1. What are the dominant themes in RE?
2. What is affirmed in the existing practices of RE?
3. What future can be imagined for RE?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The national gathering brought together scholars and practitioners (N = 57) across Australia. Invitations were extended to prospective contributors to participate in the process and make presentations on best practice in RE. Nineteen Catholic authorities were represented together with academics from Australian Catholic University (ACU), Executive

Directors and Senior Officers of Arch/Diocesan systems, governors of Religious Institutes and Ministerial Public Juridic Authorities, and representatives of the National Catholic Education Commission, Faith Formation, and Religious Education Committee.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The colloquium featured five keynote presentations, 20 elective workshops, focus group discussions, and individual and group reporting sessions. Field notes recorded lectures and workshop presentations, and recordings of small and large group discussions and individual written responses provided a basis for summative analyses. In addition, social and informal professional opportunities facilitated rich exchanges, discussion, and the development of trust, confidence, and interdependence among participants. These experiences nurtured group cohesion and provided a basis for open and forthright contributions.

Summative data were examined initially through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Hall and Sultmann 2020[1]) and subsequently though Leximancer, the focus of this paper. IPA comprises three steps: (a) data observations; (b) generating thematic titles; and (c) connecting themes through an integrating principle. Leximancer analysis was used to identify levels of emphasis within the qualitative data as measured in frequencies (hits), to identify the extent of overlapping of concepts within major themes, and as a mechanism to validate the IPA process (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of research method.

Themes and Days	Awaken Day 1	Embrace Day 2	Imagine Day 3
Research Questions	What are the dominant themes in RE?	What is affirmed in the existing practices of RE?	What future can be imagined for RE?
Data Collection	• Whole group and workshop presentations • Small group discussion • Individual reflection and reporting	• Whole group and workshop presentations • Small group discussions of nominated themes • Reporting on themes	• Whole group and workshop presentations • Small group discussions • Inspirations and remaining questions
Data Analysis	Analysis of participant responses using IPA and Leximancer.	Thematic emphases and relationships using IPA and Leximancer.	Advancing theoretical propositions to inform future directions

3. Results

3.1. Day 1: Awaken

The aim of Day 1 was to establish an awareness of the contemporary context of RE in Australia. The integration of participant reflections of Day 1 involved three steps. Step one: Individual reflection on three promptings: 'existing and emerging challenges;' 'new awakenings and future directions;' and 'other comments.' Step two: Participants were invited to offer a brief comment to the wider group and to share their more detailed written responses with the planning group. Thirty-eight individual responses were collected and collated. Step three: All members of the planning team and an invited consultant examined the 38 shared responses.

3.1.1. Interpreting the Verbal Data

Through a random allocation of individual written responses, each planning team reviewer examined responses and recorded themes of interest. Main Ideas were aggregated and shared as a summary of the overall data. Discussion and clarification of Main Ideas led to the postulation of summary Themes, and these were integrated within an overall domain for more detailed attention (Table 2). Four dominant domains of interest were identified: formation; pedagogy and curriculum; parent and parish partnerships; and research. Each domain possessed aspects of uniqueness and interdependence, with a total of 20 themes being articulated across the four domains: formation (seven), pedagogy and curriculum (seven), parents/parish/partnerships (three), and research (three).

Table 2. IPA analysis of aggregated respondent commentary (Awaken) on the nature of RE in Australia.

Main Ideas	Themes	Domains
More experiential and inquiry approach to RE . . . reconsideration of what we do in senior RE.	Senior schooling	Pedagogy and Curriculum
What exactly is expected of an RE teacher in a RE classroom in a Catholic school today, both primary and secondary?	Consensus on purpose of RE	
Formation of our teachers and parents in Catholic Education is key. Celebrate and share our successes more overtly and encourage best practice.	Professional learning	
We need to model the radical inclusion of Jesus and ensure everyone can find a place of comfort, solace, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and mercy when they are part of Catholic Education	Community for all	
The vital importance of RE teachers being able to sensitively listen to students and engage them with inquiry into 'the big questions' with sophistication in drawing upon/connection with the tradition.	Voices of youth	
There are so many points of congruence between us, along with some significant and productive collaboration, but we have never achieved a National RE curriculum. This continues to result in duplication and inefficient use of resources. This matter is still worth pursuing.	National curriculum and resourcing	
Embedding a Catholic world view across the curriculum; improve quality classroom teaching of religion; and encourage an encounter with Jesus in the religious life of the school.	RE and Catholic school identity	
Invitation—proposing not imposing; the critical need to differentiate the faith encounter. RE teachers need to be supported in their intrinsic spirituality and their self-efficacy.	Teacher evangelisation	Formation
We need to awaken the witness factor in our younger RE teachers and undergraduate RE students.	Teacher formation	
It's not good enough to have well-meaning, 'generally spiritual' people in the religious education space when we are trying to draw secondary school students into experiences where they can encounter Christ.	Witness	
What form of RE curriculum/pedagogy is responsive to our context and equips young people to dialogue with a pluralist/secular society?	Holistic engagement	
We need a critical mass of staff who passionately engage and promote Catholic identity of the school.	Critical mass	
How do we ensure RE enhances the identity of everyone in our schools—'fullness of life' for all?	Catholic identity	
Recognising that we do God's work and that union with God is critical in the work of religious education.	Embracing	
Catholic schools have something to offer Catholics (the Church) and, potentially, many others (who send their children) and the broader society.	School as engagement	Parents/ Parish/ Partnerships
Listen to parents and their opinions (families are the most important influence). Increase our efforts in the formation of parents.	Parent engagement	
The importance of parish life in renewing/refashioning to engage with people's lives and respect the agency of all the baptised.	Complement-arity in mission	
The La Salle Academy important for new research and providing resources to advance this cause.	ACU partnerships	Research
More work needs to be done on what makes for effective faith formation of students in Catholic schools.	Quality practices	
An effective and efficient way of collaborating will be the development of contemporary resources that support the teaching of religious education. This needs to be well informed by research aligned to contemporary pedagogies.	Quality resources needed	

3.1.2. Mapping Themes and Relationships

Leximancer was used to analyse the overall transcripts of reports and identify the nature and extent of responses in terms of their 'hits' and the relationships between the identified domains, themes, and main ideas. Leximancer outputs entailed four dominant areas of focus: Formation (137 hits), RE (39 hits), People (35 hits), and Work (8 hits). The interpretation of the Leximancer concept map (see Figure 1) confirmed domains of RE (Curriculum and Pedagogy), which appears larger in the concept map due to its co-occurrence with other concepts, and domains of Formation, People, and Work, which align with the IPA analysis of Formation, Parents/Parish/Partnerships, and Research, respectively. The clustering of the themes graphically presents the extent of overlap and interdependence of the domains, and, while the expression of RE is wide and unspecified, closer inquiry reveals that the two dominant elements are curriculum and pedagogy. In summary, Leximancer, coupled with IPA, provides confidence in the identification of the high priority domains of interest in RE as entailing Formation, Pedagogy, Curriculum, Partnerships, and Research.
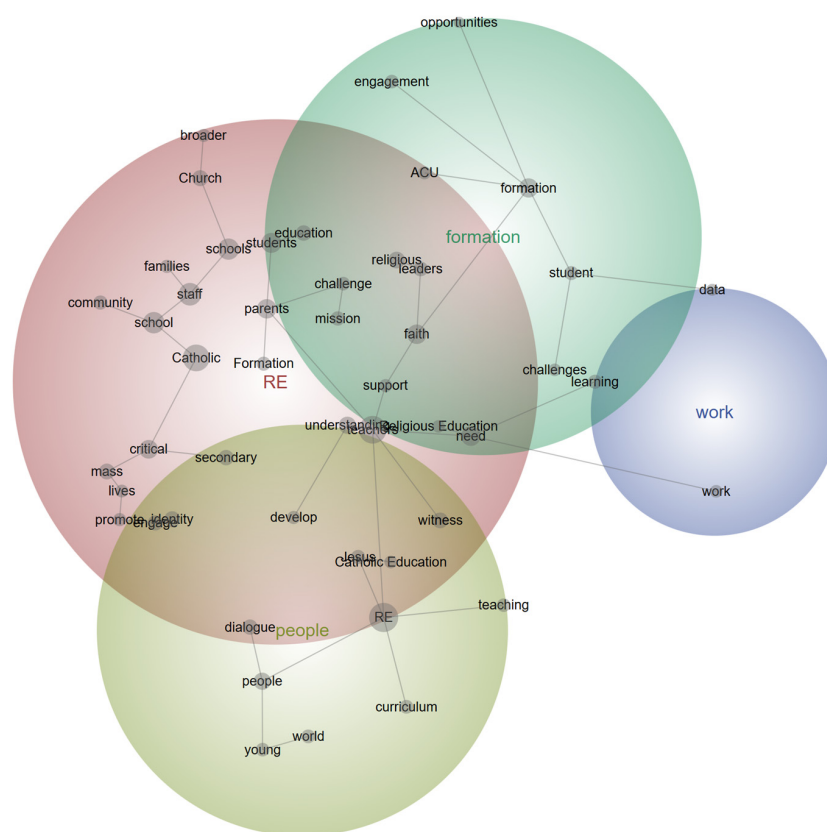
Figure 1. Concept map of aggregated respondent commentary (Awaken) on the nature of RE in Australia.

3.2. Day 2: Celebrate

Participants were invited to consider the domains of interest from Day 1 together with the emerging insights from the workshops, keynote presentations, and ongoing national gathering dialogue. The process involved the following: (1) selection of a focus group discussion on a dimension of interest; (2) engaging in a discussion as to what is working well and is effective, what challenges continue, and what are some emerging ideas within a vision for the future; and (3) recording and sharing personal and group deliberations. Each focus group reported on its deliberations, with some submitting multiple reports reflective of the breadth of dialogue.

Two reviewers analysed the reports of all five focus group domains of interest by reviewing each workshop response, summarising the responses, and categorising com-

ments according to the three questions posed within each of the domains of interest on Day 2: (1) What is effective? (2) What is challenging? (3) What might widen the vision? The subsequent analysis comprised two elements: the IPA analysis of the summary reports on the collective small group discussions (see Table 3) and the Leximancer analysis of the overall response transcripts (see Figure 2).

Table 3. Participant responses to the three questions as to the nature of RE in Australia.

Effective	Challenging	Visioning
Pedagogy Themes		
1. Research 2. Accreditation 3. Specialisation recognition 4. Multi-faith context 5. Pedagogy of encounter 6. Rich dialogue 7. Encounter with Christ	1. Witness 2. Skills of RE teachers 3. Accreditation 4. Pedagogy, assessment, content, and reporting nexus 5. Sharing good practice 6. Catering for diversity 7. Encounter	1. Educational principles 2. Action research 3. Sustainable professional learning 4. Graduate expectations 5. Strategic engagement 6. Partnerships 7. Digitalisation
Principle: Advancing an inquiring, experiential, encounter-based pedagogy.		
Formation Themes		
1. Priority of RE curriculum 2. Partnerships in provision 3. Dialogue 4. Credibility of formators 5. Integral to school mission 6. Critical time	1. Clarification of identity 2. Disconnect of faith and life 3. Strategies articulation 4. Formator capacity building 5. Personal Integration 6. Quality of resourcing 7. Diversity in faiths	1. Technology 2. Collaboration 3. Faith life integration 4. Mandated guidelines 5. Parish connection 6. Leadership
Principle: Advancing formation for personal identity and school mission.		
Curriculum Themes		
1. Understanding ECSI data 2. Curriculum and context awareness 3. Best practice 4. Creativity with Senior RE 5. Teacher preparation	1. Formation for mission 2. Catering for diversity 3. Professional learning 4. Personal identity 5. Purpose of RE 6. Witness	1. Exemplars of good practice 2. Evidence-based practice 3. Multi-faith and multi-cultural context
Principle: Advancing curriculum which is inclusive, relevant, inquiring, and life-giving.		
Parents/Parish/Partnership Themes		
1. Interesting initiatives in some dioceses 2. Parish sacramental programs	1. A common language 2. Role of family, school, parish 3. Parent involvement 4. Imbalance of resourcing	1. Honouring the contributions of stakeholders 2. Inclusiveness beyond 'Father' and 'Principal'
Principle: Honouring inclusion and engagement with family, parish, and community.		
Research Themes		
1. Starting point—questions of the students and teachers 'being attentive to reality 2. Research projects undertaken in various dioceses, including collaboration with ACU	1. Linking RE/theology as an academic exercise with faith experience and formation 2. An evidentiary platform for practice 3. National resource bank 4. Appropriate budget 5. Faith within Science	1. Long-term planning 2. Formation of teachers 3. Accountability via research 4. Digital connections 5. Best practice lighthouses 6. Philanthropic support 7. Centre for Academic Research 8. Publication/s for learning
Principle: Advancing research which identifies needs, informs practice, and monitors outcomes.		

Figure 2. Concept map of aggregated respondent commentary (Celebrate) on the transcripts recorded during Day 2.

The IPA summarised the domains of interest through the application of a series of integrating principles for each (Table 3), and the Leximancer process confirmed that the themes constituting the principle were validated as representative of the original transcripts and indicative of the significance of the domains. The concept map (Figure 2) indicated that RE (32 hits) focused on aspects of teaching and learning, teachers (24 hits) identified the relationship of teachers to the curriculum, formation (47 hits) represented the complexity and importance of professional learning, and ACU (10 hits) addressed the notion of research as integral to RE development and delivery. Moreover, the concept map illustrated the overlap of the dimensions of interest and pointed to a wholistic set of interventions and practices that would advance RE.

3.3. Day 3: Imagine

Participants in Day 3 were invited to reflect on the findings of Day 1 which focused on the contemporary nature of RE (Awaken) and on the findings of Day 2 (Celebrate) which focused on the detailed reflection on the key domains of RE generated in Day 1. Participants were asked to nominate one inspirational comment that accompanied the discussion of RE and one question that remained unanswered; these nominations were presented across the range of jurisdictions represented at the gathering.

The responses that inspired were centred in the faith foundations for RE. The centrality of Catholic faith within Catholic schools was made abundantly clear with key elements of Formation being centred in Christ, Tradition, Mission, and Faith Journey; Pedagogy situated in terms of discipleship, dialogue, inquiry, and witness; Curriculum as inclusive, founded on encounter and identity, re-contextualised and creative; Research as underpinning awareness and basis for change and accountability; and Partnerships as imperative in enabling a space for the Spirit of God to flourish and be experienced. Responses were also subjected to a Leximancer analysis. Emphasis was granted to themes of the heart (hits,

23), enabling others (hits, 14), dialogue (hits, 6), and change (hits, 4) (See Figure 3). As shown, the essence of RE is centred in a heart perspective which incorporates people and the school community experiencing a changing phenomenon supported by dialogue.
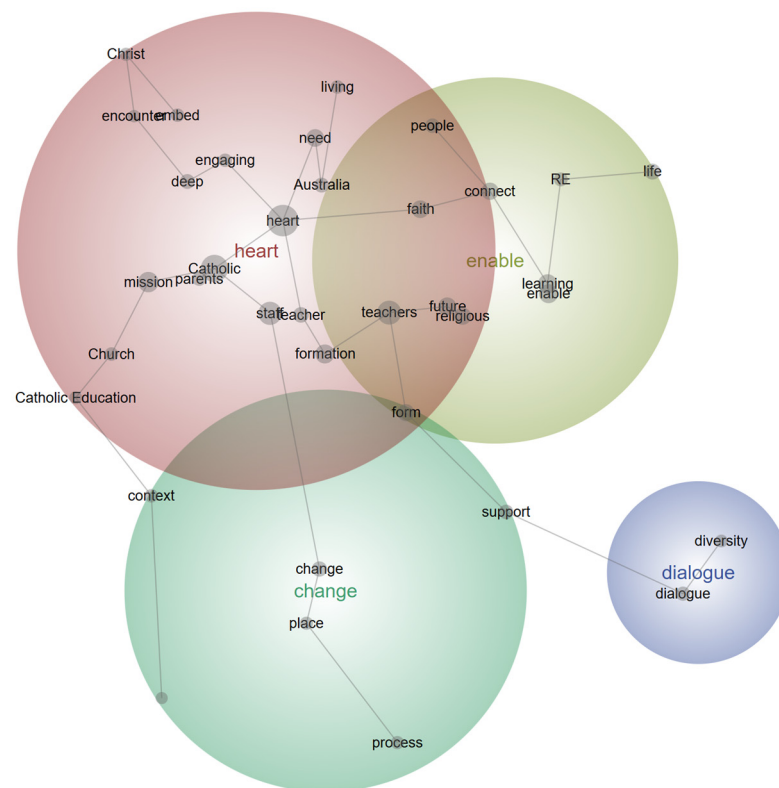
Figure 3. Concept map of participant responses to inspirations and questions in RE.

RE was emphatically recorded as underpinned by foundations identified in respondent summary comments. Formation: the centrality of Christ and the journey of individuals was seen to be critical as it 'engages the heart and hand of teachers, leaders and parents in a deep and nourishing vision of Catholic mission'. Pedagogy was seen as more than good teaching, for it involves the 'meaningful construction through structured encounters with others'. Curriculum is learning that supports 'the whole person is engaged—head, heart, body and will'. Partnerships engage people and structures within and beyond the classroom that mirror 'shared commitment, shared questions, open and responsive'. Research is carried out to elucidate; 'staff and students know that "change" is needed, but do not know what that "change" is?'

4. Discussion

The national gathering of practitioners and scholars sought to support awareness, reflection, and imagination for best practice in RE. It was not a conference in the traditional sense, but a process of engagement through dialogue. The process was shaped by its intentions and the experience, wisdom, and generosity of those who accepted the invitation to be present to one another and the fundamental curriculum of RE. Notwithstanding these parameters, the overall planning and purpose of the national gathering, together with the profile of participants, enabled substantial expertise to be applied. The discussion of proceedings and outcomes across three integrated days gave rise to theoretical propositions that provide a basis for strategies that advance RE.

4.1. Theoretical Propositions

The theoretical propositions that emerged from the national sharing are the fruits of dialogue and the analysis of reflections by a group of educators within a defined experience.

While not comprehensive, prescriptive, or definitive, the process and content of the national gathering provided a basis for the following main ideas and theoretical proposition associated with each of the five domains of interest identified as characteristic of RE in the Catholic school. Attention to these domains, the main ideas that populate them and theoretical propositions that are generated provide the platform for advancing religious education within an Australian context. They include:

4.1.1. Formation

Main Ideas: Technology, collaboration, faith/life integration, mandated guidelines, parish connection, and leadership.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing formation for RE which is attentive to personal readiness, curriculum intention, and school identity.

4.1.2. Pedagogy

Main Ideas: Educational principles, action research, sustainability, graduate expectations, strategic engagement, partnerships, and digitalisation

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE teaching through practices which incorporate inquiry, experiential learning, and encounter-based opportunities.

4.1.3. Curriculum

Main Ideas: Exemplars of good practice, evidence-based practice, and multi-faith and multi-cultural engagement.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE curriculum which is inclusive, relevant, and life-giving.

4.1.4. Partnerships

Main Ideas: School community engagement, parent engagement, and complementarity in mission.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE through inclusion and engagement with family, parish, and community.

4.1.5. Research

Main Ideas: Planning, accountability, best practice, resourcing support, centre for research, and publications.

Theoretical Proposition: Advancing RE through evidence-based practice.

4.2. Strategies

The practical application of the theoretical propositions was summarised in strategic terms through participants voicing practical strategies as to future directions. With due recognition to responsibilities of the respective authorities, participants echoed the following directional recommendations:

Formation: Confirming forums for sharing and networking and integrating faith experience and theology.

Pedagogy: Dialogue in promoting RE method and nurturing teacher dispositions of moderator, specialist, and witness.

Curriculum: Engaging teacher formation in a diverse set of skills and including school-based leaders of RE at future national gatherings.

Partnerships: Strengthening communication between ACU and Catholic education authorities and including partners who collaborate with schools (e.g., parents, parishes, spiritual movements and associations, and dioceses).

Research: Gathering quality data, learning from and applying the findings, and ensuring that meaning and communications are critical to ongoing effective learning.

While not exhaustive, these trends and influences are evidenced in the religious education curriculum in Western and European settings. From this perspective, it is helpful

to note the ongoing importance of the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools* (Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2007). These guiding principles promote greater understanding of the world's increasing religious diversity.

Building on the Toledo guiding principles, it is also important to note the significance of the Rainier Economic Development Council (REDCo) project that was funded by the European Union between 2006 and 2009 which investigated the contribution that the study of religion can make to improving understanding of the role of religion in the public square. Scholars from eight European countries participated in the project which focused on 14 to 16 year-old students. As Weisse (2011) notes, one of the key findings of the REDCo project was that 'the school has a central role to play in promoting learning about and from religions' (p. 118). This finding highlights the importance of creating a genuine curriculum and an associated pedagogical/dialogical space in the classroom that addresses religious plurality.

The changing profile of the Catholic school community in Australia invites a response to RE which is attentive to tradition, inclusive, and meaningful for all. Underpinned by faith foundations, the experience of RE is challenged to make a difference through alignment with the distinctive faith-based philosophy of the school and the dominant domains and themes nominated by practitioners and scholars as significant. The research trajectory for RE might not only review the current state of RE but also grant attention to innovative programs that shed light on the experience, reflection, and wisdom of commentators.

The national gathering, Ways Forward in Religious Education, reflects the continuing renewal of Catholic schools within the mission of the Church in Australia. For some authorities and participants, the 'fruits' of the national gathering offer expanded horizons, while for others, established and familiar pathways were validated. In this regard, the national gathering experience was one of mutual sharing in the advancement of a mission. This paper is just one indication of the quality of religious education renewal within the mission and ministry of the Catholic school in Australia. It will complement and support the continuing dialogue and creativity that constitutes religious education within Catholic schools and systems.

Note

[1] We extend our sincere appreciation to the editor of the eJournal for Catholic Education in Australasia for granting permission to reanalyse selected published original data using Leximancer and to report these new findings.

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