

LEADING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

An exploration of the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators in Catholic primary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese

Submitted by

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Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

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All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committee.

ELIZABETH DOWLING

Abstract

Schools and school leaders are experiencing a growing pressure to consistently deliver high quality education. Religious Education Coordinators (RECs) aim to encourage and support religion teachers within the school context to deliver this goal. As a means of achieving improved quality, the importance of continuous teacher learning and the influence of teaching on student outcomes has become increasingly apparent. An investment in the ongoing professional learning of religious educators is gaining prominence as a necessary vehicle for enhancing student outcomes, however it has not proved to be a panacea. Whilst continuous professional learning should be at the core of religious education teacher professionalism, in some instances this is not so. At a time when accountability has never been higher, there is growing recognition that new kinds of leadership must be centred on successful student and teacher learning. This has prompted my exploration into how RECs can lead professional learning to enhance staff and student learning.

This research seeks to better understand the potential of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. The proposed study is located within a constructivist paradigm and is informed by the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. It draws on grounded theory to explore the perceptions, expectations and experiences of leading professional learning and the opportunities for this in the context of Catholic primary schools. Through surveys, focus groups and unstructured interviews with key stakeholders in religious education, this study seeks to provide deeper understandings of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning and to generate theory to support leadership of religious educators in student learning.

Although the genre of professional learning and leadership is well established in educational literature, there has been limited empirical research in this field which focuses on the role of the REC. This investigation may have implications for what is provided as professional learning for religious educators, how it is provided and how it is supported. The findings may be particularly useful for all key stakeholders concerned with the quality of religious education who seek to implement and evaluate religious education professional learning and thus continue to improve the quality of the subject in the Catholic primary school.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS USED IN THIS THESIS

General

ACOT (Apple Classes of Tomorrow)

ACU (Australian Catholic University)

AGQTP (Australian Grants Quality Teaching Projects)

ARM (Annual Review Meeting)

CCC (Catechism of the Catholic Church)

CCE (Congregation for Catholic Education)

CECV (Catholic Education Commission of Victoria)

CEO (Catholic Education Office)

CEOM (Catholic Education Office Melbourne)

CEOS (Catholic Education Office Sydney)

CTKWL (Coming To Know Worship and Love)

CTLM (Contemporary Teaching and Learning Mathematics)

DE&T (Department of Education and Training)

DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training)

DLS (Distributed Leadership Studies)

ECSIP (Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project)

EOSQ (Economic Outcomes and School Quality)

ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center)

GT (Grounded Theory)

ICT (Information Communication Technology)

LLL (Life Long Learning)

LSF (Leadership Standards Framework)

MCEET (The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Training)

MCEETYA (Ministerial Council Education Employment Training Youth Affairs)

NCEC (National Catholic Education Commission)

NCLS (National Church Life Survey)

NIQTSL (National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership)

NSDC (National Staff Development Council)

NSWIT (New South Wales Institute of Teachers)

OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development)

OL (Organisational Learning)

PCK (Pedagogical Content Knowledge)

PD (Professional Development)

POL (Position of Leadership)

PLC (Professional Learning Community)

PLT (Professional Learning Teams)

PP (Parish Priest)

PRECPP (Primary Religious Education Coordinators Pilot Project)

QCEC (Queensland Catholic Education Commission)

RE (Religious Education)

REC (Religious Education Coordinator)

REL (Religious Education Leader)

SCCE (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education)

SIP (School Improvement Plan)

TKWL (To Know Worship and Love)

TLM (Teaching and Learning Meetings)

VELS (Victorian Essential Learning Standards)

VETC (Victorian Education and Training Committee)

VIT (Victorian Institute of Teaching)

Documents

CS (The Catholic School, 1977)

CSTM (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1998)

CT (Catechesis Tradendae, Catechesis in Our Time, 1979)

DALP (Decree of the Apoosolate of the Lay)

GDC (General Directory for Catechesis, 1997)

GV (Gravissimum Educationis, 1965)

LCS (Lay Catholic in Schools: Witnesses to Faith, 1982)

RDECS (The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, 1988)

CHAPTER ONE: THE RESEARCH DEFINED

Introduction to the Research

This first chapter orients the reader to the research topic. The chapter begins with a brief overview of what is to follow and defines the context of the research problem, (i.e. the personal, Australian, Catholic school and Religious Education (RE) classroom). In doing so the educational approach operating within the RE classroom in the Melbourne Archdiocese is described. Then the complexities facing RE leaders as they try to guide, support and develop the professional knowledge, skills and capabilities of school based RE teachers in the midst of widespread and complex social challenges and conditions are illuminated. At a time when accountability has never been higher there is growing recognition of the commitment to the pursuit of quality RE in Australian Catholic primary schools and classrooms. Given the enormous responsibility and pressures of the primary RE teacher, the chapter argues that human capital development is an important means to improve the quality of RE and to support staff and student learning in RE. This research situates the role of the Religious Education Coordinator (REC) as a key component of RE and argues that he/she has a shared leadership responsibility to improve the quality of teachers and teaching in RE. Next the chapter presents a context for improvement in RE, which holds that through professional learning good leaders can create the conditions in which others can perform at a high level. Subsequently the problem to be investigated, the dissonance between the pursuit of quality RE through leadership of professional learning and its actual practice with primary RE teachers is proposed. The purpose of the study, to investigate and analyse the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of RE teachers in Catholic primary schools and the overarching research question and sub questions that guided the study are articulated. The chapter concludes with an explanation of key terms used in the research, the aims of the research and the format of the study.

Context of the Research Problem

Personal Context

Learning, I have always felt, is as essential as breathing.

Darling – Hammond (1997)

This thesis is a result of a deep interest in and love of learning. Over the past 26 years the educational and professional experience of the researcher has been centred on building the capacity of both schools and teachers to strengthen RE programs. The researcher has had many and varied opportunities to work collaboratively with principals, RECs and teachers in Catholic primary schools and has always viewed herself as a co - learner. Through these learning opportunities she has acquired a direct knowledge and special interest in the quality of RE. The cartoon (courtesy of Graham English) featured below, epitomizes the overall intention of the research which is improved learning for all, RE teachers and students.



Figure 1:1. Improved learning for all

As researcher in this study I recognise the potential of effective professional learning to benefit RE staff and most particularly RE students. Conversely I have also observed and experienced the resistance to, and pitfalls of, professional learning for Catholic primary religious educators. Consequently this research is grounded in reflections on my own journey and issues emanating from my work with religious educators. Whilst these experiences continue to challenge, inform and inspire my research interest, they also serve to reinforce my commitment to best support leaders of RE in their important role. However, my commitment

to the ideals of the Catholic school and to the students themselves, have been a significant stimulus to me in the research and reflection that has produced this thesis. Currently in my position at Australian Catholic University (ACU) as a lecturer within the Faculty of Education in the discipline of RE, this dedication and appreciation continues.

Through ongoing conversations and reflections with school leaders, practitioners and colleagues, I have attempted to better understand the multiple perspectives and experiences of those responsible for the professional learning of religious educators, (most especially the REC), yet, many issues continue to puzzle me. Therefore a systematic exploration of the leading of professional learning within the domain of RE seemed a valid focus for further investigation. A strong interest in leadership and scholarship, combined with my own experience, has resulted in strong advocacy of Senge's notion of learning organisations. As defined by Senge (1990), learning organisations are "organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). Effective learning organisations continuously facilitate learning of their members, transforming themselves and expanding their capacity to create an improved future. Whilst this is a noble aspiration for religious educators, how to achieve it raises some fundamental questions and challenges.

Australian Context of Catholic Education

A Historical Perspective of the Primary Purpose of the Catholic School

Any discussion of RE in Catholic primary schools must be placed in its ecclesial, educational context. Through an examination of the establishment of Australian Catholic schools, it is possible to become more aware of the challenges of Catholic education today and perhaps to identify in a limited way what must be done in the future. In the initial establishment of European settlement in the colony of New South Wales (1803-4), the decision to establish an alternative system of schooling in Australia was significant. Ryan (2013, p. 36) explained, "provision was made by the embryonic Catholic community at Sydney Cove to provide basic instruction for colonial Catholic children". Under the auspices of George Morley, on the banks of the Parramatta River, a school committed to both religious and secular instruction was established for Catholic and Anglican families. These early Catholic schools had a vision and a brave dream that has been shared in collaboration with others and developed in ways

that they could never envision. From these humble and harsh beginnings, the decision to establish a separate Catholic school system signalled the genesis of a Catholic education system which required the Catholic school to meet two standards: it must be both a good school and a good Catholic school (Cook, 2001). This distinct duality has ensured that being “Catholic” as a school is the rationale for the existence of Catholic schools. Consequently the religious dimension has become a distinguishing feature of Catholic schools for many subsequent generations.

In Melbourne, Bishop Goold is well remembered for his conviction that religious instruction can never be separated from education. Throughout its history, the leaders of the Catholic community have demonstrated a strong commitment to separate Catholic schools for Catholic children, primarily to ensure that religious instruction provided by the schools could be in harmony with Catholic teaching (Ryan, 2006). Since the Catholic school has an important role in the faith community as part of the life and vision of the Catholic Church, RE must continue to be given prominence. In the life of faith of the Catholic school, RE plays both a central and an indispensable role. As Catholic schools are founded on the premise that religion is a constitutive dimension of education, this religious dimension is made particularly explicit in the subject termed RE. Consequently RE is both a key learning area in Catholic schools and a major educational priority. D’ Orsa and D’ Orsa (2012, p. 25) confirmed “The curriculum of the school is “Catholic” because Religious Education has a central place in it”. That RE needs to voice its value, importance and essential presence in the Catholic school curriculum is argued in great detail later in this chapter.

The Ecclesial Identity of Catholic Schools

The next section provides an analysis of the relationship between Catholic schools and the institutions of both religion and schooling. In order to continue the tradition of Catholic schools and their vision for the development of a deliberately religious dimension of schooling for young people in Australia, many official statements of the Church, and in particular, of the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE), provide a clear sense of the nature and purpose of the Catholic school. In the period since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) a series of magisterial statements has provided the authority for Catholic schools, and recognised and described both the *educational* and *religious* purposes of Catholic schools. Indeed, whilst much has changed since the first Catholic schools were established, one constant remains: Catholic schools are pivotal to the mission and the work of

the Church. Many key Church documents regarding Catholic Education including, *The Catholic School* [CS], (1977), *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* [RDECS] (1988), *The General Directory for Catechesis* [GDS], (1997), *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* [CSTM] (1997), *The Coming of the New Millennium* (2001) and *The Church in Oceania* (2001) all situate the purpose and mission of Catholic schools within the broader evangelising mission of the Church. The Synod for Oceania Conference (1999) stressed how central Catholic schools have been to the evangelising work of the Church in Australia. For many years they have shared the task of RE with parish and home. In essence the RE program is a fundamental activity of the Church at work: the Church exists in order to preach the Gospel (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975, n. 14). RE, therefore, is part of the evangelising mission of the Catholic school and is a significant learning area. More recently Healy (2011) confirmed how RE is based in the mission of the Church itself, developing students as lifelong learners both spiritually and cognitively.

The aim of the Catholic school and the vital role it plays in the mission of the Church was stipulated in the CSTM: “the Catholic school participates in the evangelising mission of the Church and is the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out” (CCE, 1998, n. 11). The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (SCCE, 1977) affirmed: “Complete education necessarily includes a religious dimension” (CS, n. 19). It continued: “The Church established her own schools because she considers them as a privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole person” (n. 8). CSTM (1998), asserted, “The complexity of the modern world makes it all the more necessary to increase awareness of the ecclesial character of the Catholic school” (n. 11). The ecclesial identity of Catholic schools was reaffirmed by John-Paul II (2003, p. 7) who claimed, “The Catholic school is part of the evangelising mission of the Church. It is for this reason that the Catholic school has an ecclesial identity of mandate from the Church”. These official documents collectively indicate the importance of a clear Catholic identity. The Catholicism of a school is not an option, but a fundamental reference point for the shape of its education: “It is from its Catholic identity, that the school derives its original characteristics and its “structure” as a genuine instrument of the Church” (John-Paul II, 1998, n. 11). The *religious* orientation of Catholic schools is demonstrated and reflected in vision, mission and policies, as well as in their everyday activities and practices. Different Catholic primary school mission statements identify values, beliefs, rituals and symbols giving expression to a shared faith and educational goals and a strong sense of identity (St Aloysius; St Monicas; St Peters). Of

central significance to these is a commitment to strengthen Catholic identity and recognise the place of Catholic schools within the evangelising mission of the Church.

A range of key Church documents has confirmed that Catholic schools are proud and unapologetically Catholic and various scholars give strong support to these seminal sources. Groome (1996, p. 107) reinforced “The qualifier “Catholic” does mean something for education” and calls for a commitment to Catholicity. More recently Engebretson (2009) reiterated “The Catholic school needs to emphasize what is distinctive about Catholicism” (p. 15). The *raison d’être* of the Catholic school is to educate in the Catholic faith and this commitment creates a particular challenge for school leaders since, unless a school is distinguished by its Catholicity, it fails to justify its existence separate from other schools. Catholic schools are not simply state schools with a memory of Catholicism, they are first and foremost, Catholic schools, where education in faith is given a privileged place.

It has been argued (Hunt, Oldenski & Wallace, 2000) that “Catholic schools face a critical juncture in their history as important instruments of the Church” (p. 201). The challenge now is to articulate and value this distinctive element which defines the Catholic school. In this way it will not become merely “a religious parallel of state government bureaucracies” (Griffiths & Mc Laughlin, 2000, p. 25). In understanding the importance and value of the religious dimension of Catholic schools the challenge for Catholic schools to remain genuinely Catholic has not diminished but, rather, has become even more essential within the diversity and changing circumstances of society, schools and parishes. *Gravissimum Educationis* [GE] (1965) noted the “weighty responsibility of diligently caring for the moral and religious education of all her children” (n. 7) and this rings true today.

Catholic identity

In Australia in recent times the term “Catholic identity” has emerged as a central focus for Catholic schools. Indeed a range of resource materials and national discussion papers provide a framework to identify characteristics that contribute to the identity of the Catholic school (Queensland Catholic Education Commission, [QCEC], 2005; Sultman & Brown, 2011). It has been argued recently that there seems to be no topic under more scrutiny in Catholic schools than the discussion about what it means for a Catholic school to be called “Catholic”. Increasingly over the past 20 years, the construct “Catholic identity” is being used with reference to Australian Catholic schools and RE (Rossiter, 2013). Researchers (Pollefeyt et

al., 2012) identify the phenomenon of “identity slippage” or “identity drift” and warn that unless positive responses are undertaken, it will continue apace. This burgeoning interest forms a backdrop to the *Enhancing Catholic School Identity Research Project* (ECSIP) currently undertaken across the four Victorian dioceses (and also now extending to other dioceses across Australia).

It is necessary here to comment briefly on this project because of its size and its significant contribution to the contemporary discourse about the Catholic identity of schools in the Australian and particularly the Victorian context. The four Catholic Education Offices (CEO) in Victoria, in collaboration with the Leuven University have invested a great deal of time and resources to support schools to enhance and monitor their Catholic identity. A research partnership with the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium, the *Catholic Education Commission of Victoria*, (CECV) (which includes the CEOs of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sandhurst and Sale), aim to profile and develop the Catholic identity of schools. The research equips Catholic schools to better understand how their Catholic identity is expressed in work and practice and to support them in their future development. However a key factor that impinges on the identity of the Catholic school is the priority designated to the teaching and learning of RE. Davison (2013) stated that a key tool used in this research, *The Melbourne Scale*, “gives indications of where professional development activities should be focussed, or how classroom RE can be planned and taught for example” (p. 6).

The quality of the RE program which gives substantive access to Catholic traditions is one explicit way to reflect on the Catholic schools’ own present and possible future Catholic identity. Arguably RE is highly significant, with many arguing that if it is not nurtured both implicitly and explicitly it may be lost. The growing interest in measuring and defining Catholic identity suggests there is a need for RE scholars to have more informed debate about its meaning, its scope and its place in contemporary RE.

RE in contemporary Catholic schools

The Catholic school is one significant means by which the Church implements its mission and vision. Catholic schools offer a distinctive view of education based on the gospel and the Catholic tradition. Whilst the religious dimension should permeate all aspects of the Catholic school, RE is the underlying reason for the school’s existence. In this context, a Catholic school strives to develop the religious understanding of students and to potentially nurture

their growth in faith. The enduring Catholic position is that a Catholic school's core purpose is explicitly religious. That is, RE is one of the most obvious ways that the Catholic identity of a Catholic school is exhibited. That RE has always been and continues to be fundamental to Catholic Education, is confirmed by the CECV, (1997) Policy 1.7 which stated, "Religious education is an essential function of Church" (p. 3). It could be argued from this that, if a Catholic school failed to offer the best RE that it could to its students, it would be betraying its mission. The CCE (1988) in RDECS amplified this argument:

The Catholic school, of course would no longer deserve the title if, no matter how good its reputation for teaching in other areas, there were just grounds for a reproach of negligence or deviation in religious education properly so-called. The special character of the Catholic school and the underlying reason for its existence is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the overall education of the students (n. 66).

In the Australian context the term "religious instruction" in the forgoing quotation, is more commonly referred to as RE. Consequently, in striving to meet the aforementioned goal of RE in the Australian Catholic primary school context, religious educators under the leadership of the REC and with the support of school leadership, must offer an RE curriculum that is both academically rigorous and innovative, bringing into dialogue faith and life. Whilst numerous proponents support the argument that RE should be at the centre of the curriculum of Catholic schools, CS (1977) claimed: "it must, nevertheless, also be imparted explicitly and in a systematic manner (n. 50). RDECS confirmed the significance of RE and insisted that it has a strong educational and cognitive aspect- to support which is a key responsibility of the principal and of the REC:

It should have its own syllabus, approved by those in authority it should also seek appropriate interdisciplinary links with course material so that there is coordination between human learning and religious awareness. Like other course work, it should promote culture, and it should make use of the best educational methods available to school today (CCE, 1988, n. 70).

All religious educators working in the Catholic tradition need to be aware that a number of significant documents have been written to guide reflection and practice of issues concerning their work. Further, they should also be conscious of the status and content of these documents. This will assist them to understand and appropriately apply the documents to their work in RE.

Educational Approach to RE

It is also vital for researchers and RE educators to understand the underpinning approach to diocesan RE curriculum, as that approach will directly affect many elements of their RE curriculum, including, planning, content, pedagogy, methodology, teaching and learning activities, assessment and reporting procedures. Each of the aforementioned elements may provide valid stimulus for efforts aimed to enhance the quality of RE. Critical to this research is an understanding of how these areas within curricula implementation are approached and practised in the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

As Catholic schools religion programs continue to be increasingly aligned with other curriculum areas, the issue of professional learning will continue to be shaped and developed accordingly. Before a closer examination of the Melbourne curriculum occurs, it is first necessary to provide some background to the approach used in the Archdiocese.

An educational approach (Rummery, 1977; Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; 1988; Moran, 2002) emphasizes the quest for knowledge and understanding of RE subject matter. The educational approach emerged in the 1990s and guides RE in Australian schools today (Buchanan, 2005). Unlike earlier approaches, it adopts a more academic structure in line with other curriculum areas and has found favour in many dioceses (Catholic Education Office Brisbane, [CEOB], 2012; CEOM, 2008; Catholic Education Office Sydney [CEOS], 2010).

This approach emphasises the cognitive dimension of learning and it assesses student knowledge in relation to measurable learning outcomes (Lacey, 2011). The aim is understanding of content taking account of students' religious and cultural diversity. All students, regardless of their religious background, are capable of learning about the Catholic faith, even if it is not the religion in which they participate (Buchanan, 2009). This educational approach has gained acceptance in Australian Catholic school religion programs and is reflected in the present materials used in primary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese, namely *Coming to Know Worship and Love Curriculum Framework* (CTKWL, 2008) and the student text *To Know Worship and Love* (TKWL, 2005). Like other key learning areas of the primary curriculum, RE is now positioned as an educational activity focusing on the development of students' religious literacy in light of the Catholic tradition. This educational approach necessitates that all educational tasks are rich and contain as much scope and depth as other disciplines (Healy, 2011; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013).

Whilst an appeal of this approach is that it provides opportunities for the development of high order cognitive processes including reflection and critical thinking, RE teachers play a pivotal role in its successful implementation by facilitating and guiding the learning in the appropriate direction. Consequently RE teachers need to be adequately educated in both content knowledge and how to facilitate inquiry, so that student learning in RE is supported. RE teachers must use a variety of pedagogical knowledge in creative ways to help students achieve understanding. This approach has led to a rethinking of RE pedagogy and opened the door to theological debates and methods that are still in contention today. In the Melbourne Catholic primary context *The Good Shepherd Experience* influenced by *Godly Play* (Berryman, 2009) and *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* (Cavaletti, 1996) is the methodology for years P-2 and an inquiry approach, entitled *Faith Seeking Understanding*, is applied to years 3-6.

The important educational nature of RE is reinforced by De Souza, Durka, Engebretson, Jackson & Mc Grady, who claimed, “Attention should be given to providing religious education in the most educationally valid way” (2007, p. 554). Numerous contemporary religious scholars demand that RE should “have a defined and valued place in the curriculum” (Rymarz & Hyde, 2013, p. 27). It must take its place amongst other cognitive disciplines affording the same professional standing as other key areas of the curriculum (Healy, 2011; Lacey, 2011). Catholic schools deepen understanding of the Catholic faith tradition in and through their RE programs, which must be constructed, planned and taught, in an academically rigorous way using appropriate contemporary pedagogies.

Further, as RE is indeed a subject in its own right it must be afforded the same educational and pedagogical approaches as other subject areas. The key educational role of Catholic schools and the importance of RE in Australia are echoed today by bishops, Australian Catholic leaders and numerous RE scholars. The educational process is informed by a dialogue between the wisdom of the Catholic tradition and contemporary philosophies, theories, research and pedagogies. “In Catholic school classrooms the goal of religious education is to help students build up their understanding of the Catholic tradition in a way that is educationally sound and sophisticated” (Rymarz & Hyde, 2013, p. 15). Further, this goal must be achieved within the contemporary reality of Australian homes and society.

Understanding and acknowledging the changed situation of RE is crucial for the future of Catholic school RE. This section acknowledges the challenge facing Catholic leaders as they try to guide, support and develop the professional knowledge, skills and capabilities of school based RE personnel in the midst of widespread and complex social conditions. Catholic schools, as public institutions, continually interact and engage with their local communities and the broader society and culture. This has been recognised in comments such as the following: “The embeddedness of Catholic schools in a broader context raises key questions about their role and function” (Angelico, 2006, p. 12). For the purpose of this study, key questions about RE in an ever-changing environment must be acknowledged. The challenge of identifying the nature and diversity of school communities has been well established (English, 2007) and this plurality is reflected in the lives of families, teachers and students as they bring the strengths, weaknesses and changing attitudes and realities of society to the RE classroom.

In society, a complex relationship exists between individuals, groups, religious traditions and the society in which they operate. Just as Australian society has evolved and changed over the course of its history, so too has the place of religion in that society. It is crucial, therefore, to recognise the changing place of religion in Australian society over time, and the resultant impact this has had on the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools. Bouma (2006, p. 106) asserted: “The place of religion in Australian society has changed dramatically. Several substantial shifts in the organisation and composition of Australian society have had a major impact on the religious and spiritual life of Australia”. From an historical western perspective at least, the significance of religion to society and culture can be expressed as a movement from the centre to the margin (Angelico, 2006). Many years ago, White (1992, p. 107) described “the demise of Christendom”, which acknowledged a sharp decline in the proportion of Catholics participating in the life of the Church. His observations are supported by the writings of the CCE (1997), which also recognised that the Christian world view is diminishing in what have historically been countries of a dominant Christian culture.

More recently the change in commitment to and practice of religion has been well documented (National Church Life Survey [NCLS] 2011, ACES, 2007; Dixon, 2006). CSTM (1997) confirmed that the widespread decline in traditional religious practice in the west is

mirrored here in Australia. “The religious background of the Australian population continues to diversify away from its Christian majority” (Ryan, 2013, p. 157). This gradual erosion of religion as an important influence in modern Australian society means that increased cultural and religious pluralism are now definitional of the frontier on which Catholic schools operate and RE takes place. This is evidenced by a growing “post ecclesial” (Rolheiser, 2008) and “post – denominational” (Allen, 2009) generation where beliefs and values are not limited to one particular denomination. Compounding this current wide range of competing beliefs and values, Catholic schools are entrenched in a prevailing secular culture. This is a crucial issue according to McKinney & Sullivan (2013, p. 29) who claimed: ‘Maintaining Catholic identity in Catholic educational institutions emerges as the challenge for Catholic education, in a 21st century cultural context that is increasingly ambivalent if not hostile to religion’.

Within this complex and changing context it is the important role of the Archbishop to ensure that the mission and tradition of the Church is expressed faithfully by all organisations within his diocese. The present Archbishop of Melbourne (Archbishop Denis Hart) as the chief educator of the diocese, has responsibility for the pastoral and religious care of the diocese as a whole. Hart (2011) recognised that the growing marginalisation of faith in an increasingly secular society has provided *challenges* (emphasis researcher) to Catholic education in recent years.

Increasing secularity and increased multiculturalism in Australia has meant an increase in the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools from non-Catholic backgrounds and backgrounds without regular participation in Catholic parish (QCEC, 2008). Similarly the CEOM (2009, p. 2) recognised: “our society is both blessed and challenged by a growing diversity of cultures and faith”.

Contemporary RE in Australia faces additional challenges from globalisation, the knowledge and information explosion, technology, consumerism, and contemporary popular culture. Pope Benedict XVI (2010) recognised that we are all affected by profound sociological, technological, cultural and economic change. The faith influencing capacity of these phenomena are recognised as influences which deserve consideration in any discussion about improving the teaching of RE. RE and the institutional Church undergo both rapid and unprecedented change, as each of these issues adds complexity for those responsible for the quality of RE teaching in Catholic schools today.

The Classroom Context of RE

Commitment to the pursuit of quality RE in Catholic primary schools

Despite the aforementioned challenges, through the combined capacities of the institutions of religion and schooling, contemporary Catholic education has maintained its firm commitment to be attentive to both the religious and educational dimensions of schooling. Contemporary Catholic education stakeholders demonstrate this commitment by setting high and clear expectations in the area of RE. At a systems level, an analysis of vital documentation from a variety of CEOs around Australia validates and celebrates the central role that RE can play in both the formal and informal curriculum. More locally Catholic school vision statements and websites testify that Catholic schools pride themselves on their commitment to quality RE programs. Sheehan (2004) argued that in the knowledge based economy, the significance of education has enhanced importance. It follows, therefore, that in Catholic schools, equally important in the knowledge based economy, is the fact that they must achieve high quality outcomes in RE too. There is considerable evidence of this continued commitment to *high quality RE* curriculum which, as has been argued, must be shaped by contemporary curriculum and pedagogy. The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) documented this commitment in the 2009 *Religious Education in Dialogue: Curriculum in Australia* monograph, written and developed by NCEC RE committee members from around Australia.

Table 1.1.

Australian Commitment to Quality Religious Education

Catholic Education Office	Strategic plan/goal
Australian Capital Territory	"It will continue to be important to highlight the distinctiveness and centrality of Religious Education in Catholic schools" (p. 7).
New South Wales	The new [RE] Syllabus was intentionally based on the NSW Syllabus Framework so teachers could recognize its professional foundation and coherence with other state syllabuses. Thus the Religious Education curriculum that promotes deep knowledge, understanding and celebration of the Catholic tradition through quality pedagogical practices (p. 15).
Western Australia	"Catholic schools are required to provide all students with a systematic Religious Education that reflects the same educational demands, rigour and depth as other learning areas" (p. 49).
Tasmania	"The provision of a rich, educationally sound and challenging learning environment for RE is within the capacity of Religious Educators" (p. 57).

These assurances are also reiterated at the local level through numerous School Improvement Plans (SIPs). The view that RE must be a key subject in the school curriculum has been highlighted by Lovat (2009): “There is no future anywhere for serious religious education unless it can stand alongside other subjects as a contributor to good education, be it functioning in a public, private or religious setting” (p. 26). For those charged with the responsibility to value academic excellence and students’ educational attainment in RE, this is an increasingly complex challenge.

Compounding this scenario, Catholic primary school RE programs now operate in what may be described as “a culture of compliance” (Sawyer, 2004). The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT, 2013) dictates professional system requirements for teachers and these are matched by systemic calls (CEO) for accreditation in RE. *The Religious Education Accreditation policy* clearly stipulated: “Teachers of religious education as well as those leading Catholic schools require additional professional competence in scripture, theology, RE and faith formation and a highly developed sense of confidence in their delivery of RE” (NCEC, 2009). A key strategy aimed at ensuring high quality teachers of RE is accreditation. To achieve this goal, the CEOM and all diocesan offices in Victoria administer the policy of the CECV, *Accreditation to Teach Religious Education in a Catholic School* (CECV Policy 1.7). Accreditation requirements were developed out of an awareness that the Catholic school community has a responsibility in providing “appropriate, supportive, yet rigorous pathways for the preparation and ongoing professional learning of teachers especially in RE” (Conference of Diocesan Directors of Education, 2010, p. 1). The key requirements for applicants are the successful completion of a formal course and its assessment, and satisfactory evidence of practical experience in teaching RE in a classroom setting. This course aims to ensure religious educators in a Catholic school have an appropriate and adequate knowledge of Catholic faith, tradition and practice in order to teach diocesan frameworks and texts for RE competently. This support has been developed to recognise the need to improve the knowledge and personal formation of teachers of RE in Catholic schools and to strengthen the provision of RE classes in Catholic schools through the academic and personal formation of teachers. The success or otherwise of this initiative is open to debate, as no research has been conducted to monitor the benefits or otherwise of this scheme.

In recent years, within a society that values accountability and reporting, there has been a growing interest in the quality of RE and this has emanated from numerous sources.

Catholic primary schools are now being asked to account for student learning in the RE program and to report on this to “various stakeholders including students, parents, parish priest, Catholic Education Office Melbourne” (CEOM, 2008, p. 17). All schools work in an era of increased expectations from educational systems, reformers, parents and industry that demand improved student results. Accountability has become a major focus of government education authorities across Australia. Likewise in RE expressions of interest and demands for accountability are ongoing and becoming more articulate. A new “professionalism” based on performativity in the form of greater regulation, compliance and accountability (Ball, 2008) has encouraged the CEOM to align the RE curriculum with the educational direction of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) in an outcome-based format (CEOM, 2005). In response to external control, accountability and compliance, contemporary schools are data driven and unashamedly co-ordinate school efforts towards improved student achievement. RE should be no exception. Perhaps the most visible form of accountability in RE is the systemic requirements from CEOs such as RE teachers reporting to standards (CEOM, 2005) and a Year 6 RE test (CEOS, 2010). Such requirements compel leaders of RE to explore initiatives to improve student learning and instruction. With a growing concern for “higher quality” and “excellence” in schools, it is not surprising to find that “student improvement” is also a catch phrase in RE, which requires due consideration. For leaders of RE, the time is opportune and the need is pressing, to explore more deeply how best to support classroom religious educators who must be encouraged in their efforts to achieve high quality RE. Such a commitment calls leaders of RE to reflect and promote at every opportunity, the value and importance of the RE teacher.

Pressures on the RE teacher

The chapter has argued that Catholic schools give priority to the teaching of RE and this should be especially so in making decisions relating to RE staffing. The official view and expectations of RE teachers are clearly and unequivocally expressed in numerous CEO documents which indicate that it is a requirement that all teachers of RE be qualified teachers, with the necessary background, knowledge, and professional commitment to the purposes of RE and the ethos of the Catholic school. If Catholic schools are focussed on quality learning for students in RE, this depends on quality teaching in RE.

Buchanan (2006) described the role of the RE teacher as having five elements: the qualified professional, the personally formed individual, the witness to faith, the portrayer of

the image of the Catholic school and the deliverer of high quality curriculum. Whilst his view highlights the enormous responsibility of the RE teacher, it also addresses the essential professional and educational requirements necessary for the contemporary religious educator, the last aspect being of great significance to this research.

The RE teacher, both personally and professionally, has been cast as central to the effectiveness of the religious dimension of the school. Consequently RE teachers are paramount stakeholders in the contemporary Catholic classroom. The significance of the classroom religious educator for Catholic education is made clear: “Teachers are by far the most important resource for student learning” (CECV, 2005, p. 20). As a critical factor influencing the achievement of students (Hattie, 2009), the classroom teacher is invested with great responsibility in negotiating the nexus between the demands of the RE curriculum, and its stakeholders, and the needs of the RE student. It is important that the classroom RE teacher in a Catholic school co-operates with the bishop, priest, principal, parents, students and other colleagues, school policies and RE curricula to fulfil the evangelising mission of the Church within each classroom and for each RE student.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has on numerous occasions, reaffirmed the importance of teachers in the ministry of the Church. The CCE (1982, n. 2) document *Lay Catholics in School: Witnesses to Faith* (LCS) asserted: “For it is the lay teachers, and indeed all lay persons, believers or not, who will substantially determine whether or not a school realises its aims and accomplishes its objectives”. These intentions are reiterated in RDECS (1988): “The religion teacher is the key role, the vital component, if the educational goals of the school are to be achieved” (n. 96). More recently CSTM (1997) confirmed: “We must remember that teachers and educators fulfil a specific mission of the Church, to the extent that “it depends chiefly in them whether the Catholic School achieves its purpose” (n. 19).

SCCE (1982) recognised the responsibility of the school as part of the ecclesial (Catholic) community to assist in the formation of teachers:

Lay educators also have a right to expect that, within the ecclesial community, bishops, priest, and religious, especially those dedicated to the apostolate of education, and also various groups and association of lay Catholic educators, will help to awaken them to their personal needs on the area of formation, and will find means to stimulate them so that they can give themselves more totally to the social commitment that such formation requires (n. 63).

Various Church documents have articulated a strong commitment to ongoing and permanent formation or teacher development in the field of RE. The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People [DALP] (1996) proposed: “training at once many sided and complete is indispensable if the apostolate is to be fully active” (n. 28). CCE (1982, n. 14) asserted the Catholic educator needs “the best possible professional qualifications”. Church documentation is adamant: “The school must do everything in its power to aid the Church to fulfil its catechetical mission and so must have the best qualified teachers of religion” (SCCE, 1977, n. 52) and argued the need for “appropriate degrees and... adequate preparation in religious pedagogy” (SCCE, 1982, n. 66). For this reason, the formation and development of teachers is a high priority of CEOs.

Fry (2005, p .9) challenged teachers of RE to “put the teaching of RE at the forefront of their professional commitment to content pedagogy and practice”. In the Australian context, Healy’s, (2011) *Study of factors that enhance the implementation of a curriculum framework for RE* in Hobart confirmed the importance of “providing professional support, collegial sharing of information and knowledge” (p. 31). This finding supported the study by Harvey (2009) who noted the significance of professional learning for RE educators claiming it should be ongoing supported and include principles of collaborative learning.

Human Capital Development

Globalisation of the economy is changing the structure of industry, the nature of work and work requirements (Berberoglu, 2002). These changes are having a consequential impact on the skills and capabilities demanded of the workforce. Perhaps the most prominent conceptual framing that has been brought to bear on the issue of teaching quality in recent years is that of human capital management. “Human capital development” coined by Healy (2002), is, the notion that knowledge, skills and attributes derived from education, training and experience represent some of society’s most valuable resources. It has become a key driver of economic, technological and community development. This concept of human capital development reflects the imperative of aligning educational learning outcomes with the requirements of a knowledge society (Hargreaves, 2003). Ongoing government reports reiterate the importance of, and need for quality teacher professional development (PD) and funding for teachers’ professional development, is now a higher priority of governments than in the past (Australian Government, 2013; Department of Education and Training [DE&T],

2003; Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2003; Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004).

According to recent educational research (Robinson, 2011; Rowe, 2007; Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004), successful schools continually work to develop a culture of student, teacher and leadership learning success. Providing high quality and sustained teacher learning opportunities is a key factor in promoting student learning. It is claimed that “in every nation, there is emerging consensus that teachers have a significant impact on student learning and school efficacy” (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005, p. 40). Scholarly insistence (Cole, 2005; Hord, 2008) that quality professional learning is deemed effective when its impact can be demonstrated on the ultimate goal - student learning,- is of major importance to this study and is indisputably sound. All this evidence validates the significance of supporting RE teachers’ ongoing growth with respect to their development as professionals and with a view to student achievement.

Given these clear mandates, all agents of influence in the Catholic school (CEOs, parish priests, principals, RECs and RE teachers) must be jointly committed to the formal, deliberate and proactive professional learning of RE staff. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that when a teacher is employed in a Catholic school to teach RE, they will be given every opportunity to regularly undertake high quality and targeted learning that will assist in their ongoing formation and professional learning. In this way RE teachers can be supported to be knowledgeable, skilful and innovative teachers who are equipped to facilitate quality learning. Numerous scholars have emphasised this importance, Sullivan (2001, p. 83) insisted that “If teachers do not possess a clear sense of their apostolic mission, if their own development is imbalanced or lacking key ingredients, then the school will wander further and further away from its objectives”. Consequently, if teachers of RE are entrusted with delivering high quality religious curriculum, professional learning and leadership support and direction will be required.

The Leadership role of the REC to enhance Teacher and Student Learning

Leadership in a Catholic school is exercised on different levels and through a variety of roles. The responsibility for the Catholic life of the school is shared by many however, the REC makes an important and specific contribution to the leadership of Catholic schools. The

introduction of the REC position into Catholic schools in Australia has enabled the mission of the Catholic school to be more explicit and focused (Crotty, 2006). An REC exercises his or her ministry in collaboration with the clergy, the principal, teachers, parents and other members of the faith community, who contribute to the life of the school. It can be argued therefore that the REC holds a key leadership position in the life of the school and the Church. Researchers have recognised that the role of the REC has become a highly valued position that contributes to what is distinctive about Catholic education (Crotty, 2006; Dowling, 2011).

This research situates the role of the REC in the core of the enterprise of RE. Annual data collected by the CEOM since 1988 pertaining to the role of the REC, confirmed that schools within the Melbourne Archdiocese have a designated role of REC, which carries specific responsibilities and duties which may include both curriculum and professional development. This ongoing data verified that the RE program and teaching is a particular concern of the REC. Consequently, the REC, who is delegated responsibility from the principal for the coordination/leadership of teaching and learning in RE, has a shared responsibility to improve student learning. This implies a reciprocal responsibility to assist to improve the quality of RE teachers and teaching. The significance of this responsibility for the REC in the Melbourne Archdiocese is evidenced in the *Leadership in Catholic Schools Draft policy* (CEOM. 2.22, p. 1) which declared that the REC has “a central role with broad responsibilities for the **learning** programs and the life in faith of the school” (Emphasis of the researcher).

The Context for Improvement in RE

Throughout this discussion it has become increasingly clear that through their distinctive educational mandate, Catholic schools make a unique contribution to the intellectual, emotional and spiritual well-being of their students. The religious dimension of the Catholic school, therefore, is not an option but must always be viewed as at the heart of the school’s identity as a Catholic institution. Catholic identity is fundamental to the survival of Catholic schools and must be pervasive and ubiquitous. Given this strong mandate RE remains a core subject and is a key learning area, which must employ educational methodologies and yield educational outcomes. This places an important onus on the RE teacher. If Catholic schools want RE teachers to deliver high quality RE curriculum, key stakeholders must ensure that

RE teachers are continuously challenged to refine and improve their teaching knowledge and practice in RE in order to encourage and provide quality RE. The REC has a leadership role in animating the defining elements of the Catholic school identity, including a key responsibility for classroom RE and student learning in RE.

Figure 1:2. presents a context for improvement in RE and holds that through professional learning good leaders can create the conditions in which others (RE classroom teachers) can perform at a high level. In exploring the context for improved quality in RE, the diagram suggests a direct link between the following factors in order of impact. Effective RE leadership can have an impact on professional learning, teacher effectiveness and practice and improved student learning outcomes. When this order of influence is considered, it can be seen that whilst RE teachers make a difference (Dinham, 2010), it is good leadership that can begin the cascade effect that may deliver improved student learning outcomes in RE. The importance of RE educational leadership is intricately intertwined with professional learning, improved teaching practice and student improvement.

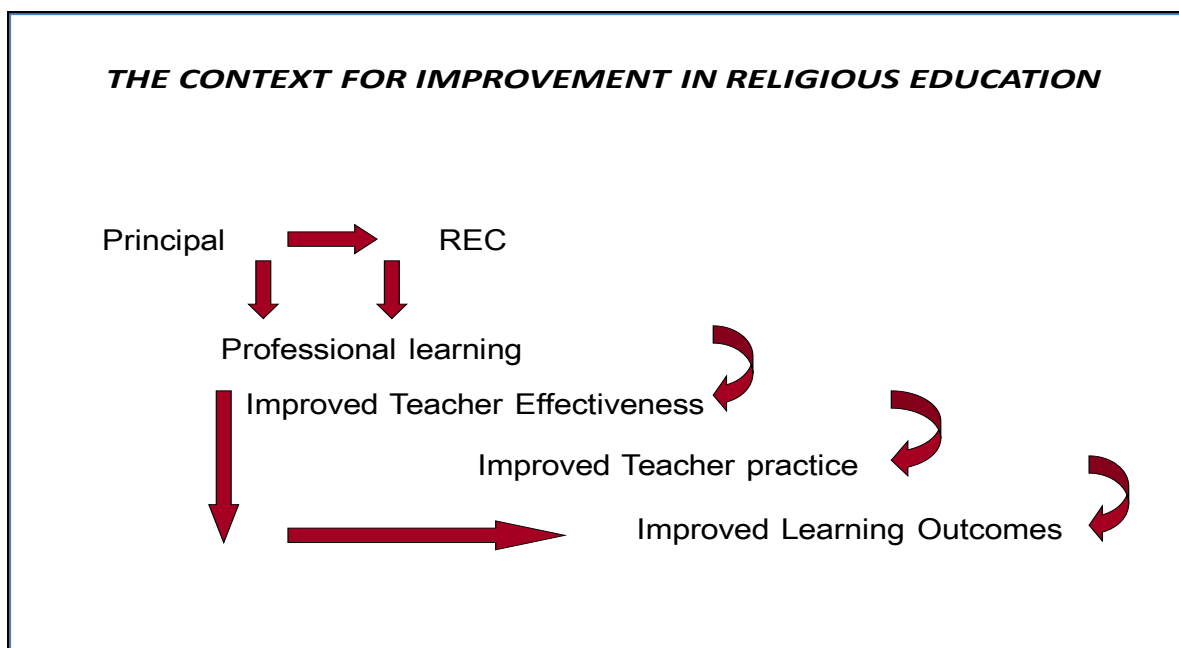


Figure 1:2. The Context for Improvement in RE.

The Problem to be Investigated

Continuous professional learning is vital to education (Opfer & Pedder, 2011) and, in this study, the RE profession in the primary school context. Professional learning has increased exponentially in recent years (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2009; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005). Despite this rapid expansion in educational circles, there is scant literature to support the REC in their work of leading learning in the primary RE context. Little knowledge is available about the professional learning efforts to support RE classroom teachers and ultimately student learning in RE. Further, detailed empirical information is lacking about the nature of school based professional learning and how this is facilitated by primary RECs. Although literature and research on effective professional learning for teachers is clear about characteristics of effective professional learning, in my experience throughout the Melbourne Archdiocese there has been ample evidence that the practice is more difficult. For religious educators some uncomfortable truths suggest that it is in the translation of these principles into practice that work remains to be done.

This study provides an opportunity to contribute to knowledge in the field associated with leadership and professional learning in RE. It gives voice to RE stakeholders to determine if professional learning for religious educators has the enhancement of student learning as its aim. Further, whilst the need for ongoing effective professional learning for religious educators is continually advocated, where the responsibility for its design and support lies remains less clear. This study paid increased attention to the activities, conditions and situation in which RECs lead professional learning.

The Research Issue

The research issue at the centre of this project is the dissonance between theory of professional learning for teachers and its actual practice with primary religious educators. Optimal ways to lead, understand, engage with and operationalise professional learning for religious educators are required. At a time when accountability has never been higher (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2010), there is a growing recognition that Catholic primary schools need leadership which focuses on advancing student and staff learning. To lead professional

learning however, RECs require the necessary background, skills, knowledge and professional commitment. A paucity of research on the educational leadership role of the primary REC means that little is yet known about the potential for the REC to lead and establish ongoing professional learning for RE staff in the context of Catholic primary schools. This situation invites a major re-consideration of the current practice of RECs. On anecdotal evidence, the RECs' understanding of these leadership responsibilities may be widely divergent. Their capacity to lead professional learning initiatives to benefit students remains a challenge since anecdotal feedback and observations have highlighted that some RECs' do not feel confident, skilled or willing to take a leadership role in staff professional learning. A significant purpose of the REC's role is RE curriculum development. Therefore, realising the opportunities and meeting the challenges of RE in Australia's ever changing religious landscape, requires continual research about the potential of the leadership role of RECs in shaping and directing professional learning to produce positive outcomes for both staff and students. These challenges have prompted me to consider how to empower RECs *to lead* professional learning, in turn enhancing student and staff learning.

The Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this research study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators. To this purpose, the researcher built upon the work of scholars as well as other relevant recent studies. The major stakeholders selected for the purpose of this research were CEO representatives, principals, RECs and RE classroom teachers. The study was undertaken within the Melbourne Catholic Archdiocese.

Research Question

The following overarching question was explored:

What are the perspectives on how RECs lead professional learning of primary RE teachers in the Melbourne Archdiocese to encourage teacher and student learning?

As is illustrated in the following chapter, the research questions that guided this study were developed following a comprehensive review of relevant literature which is provided in Chapter two of this thesis. Based on these insights and linked to this previously stated driving question, a number of sub questions emerged from the review of the literature. These are listed as follows:

- According to key stakeholders, what models/approaches to professional learning are suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools?
- According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen and challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?
- According to key stakeholders how do they perceive and value the responsibilities and leadership role of the REC in professional learning?

It is hoped that in seeking to answer the overarching question, new knowledge and insights can be gained in regard to the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in Catholic primary schools.

Definition of Key Terms in this Research

A tentative definition at this time for key words used in this study is now provided. For the purpose of this research the term REC is used to signify all those in the formally designated leadership role responsible for RE in Catholic primary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese. As educational discourse has slowly shifted from the term professional development to professional learning (Mc Rae, Ainsworth, Groves, Rowland & Zbar, 2001; Cole, 2005), a simple definition for a far more complex reality is that professional learning refers to the growth of teacher expertise that leads to improved student learning. Whilst it is acknowledged that professional learning in RE can also occur as formation for RE staff, this aspect is not the focus of this research. It should also be noted that the definitions provided here are not to be confused with a more detailed discussion of these terms in Chapter two in the review of the literature. The intent here is to convey to readers at an early stage a general sense of the central phenomenon under investigation.

Aims of this Research

Whilst Chapter one has provided a background to, and an explanation of the research problem, it is also necessary to give shape to the research problem by establishing clear research aims. Flowing from the research questions already listed and drawing on the perspectives of key stakeholders, the aims of this research were

- To better understand how RE teachers grow professionally and identify the conditions that support and promote this growth.
- To clarify the conceptual and practical issues relevant to the leadership responsibilities of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators
- To examine the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead professional learning to reconceptualise the requirements needed to successfully lead staff and student learning in RE
- To identify the perceptions of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning
- To identify implications for classroom teaching, school and public policy of approaches to professional learning for religious educators in the Catholic primary context.

Format of the Study

The thesis consists of eight chapters, an overview of which is provided in Table 1. 2.

Table. 1.2.
Overview of the thesis structure

CHAPTER	HEADING
1	The Research Defined
2	Review of the Literature
3	The Research Design
4	Presentation and Qualitative analysis of research findings- Stage One
5	Presentation and Qualitative analysis of research findings- Stage Two -Part one
6	Presentation and Qualitative analysis of research findings- Stage Two –Part two
7	Presentation and Qualitative analysis of research findings- Stage Three
8	Review, Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter one describes the significance of the problem to be investigated, how the problem developed and why it was investigated. Chapter two provides a critical synthesis of the literature that underpins the research problem described in Chapter one. It examines the work (Australian and international) of researchers, and primary and secondary documents which have shaped understandings about professional learning, leadership and RECs. It provides a comprehensive overview of the issues which have emerged from these fields and argues the sub questions to be investigated in this research. Chapter three discusses the qualitative nature of this social research and explains and justifies the research design adopted in this exploration of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. Epistemological and theoretical perspectives are discussed within the context of a theoretical framework, with grounded theory (GT) as the methodology. Chapters four, five, six and seven examine the topic from the perspectives of four groups of stakeholders in RE in Catholic primary schools. Beginning with surveys with classroom teachers and RECs, focus groups with RECs and principals and interviews with RECs, principals and four relevant key CEO personnel, it presents the data generated in Stage one, two and three. It outlines the major findings from this study and the analysis of this data, and provides some theoretical propositions. Chapter eight summarises the key aspects of theory that emerged and delineates these as the major conclusions of the research. Recommendations to assist all those responsible for professional learning of religious educators in Catholic primary schools, as well as avenues for future research are provided. This final chapter assesses the results of the research project by revisiting the projects stated purpose.

Conclusion to the Chapter

Having acknowledged the background and context within which the study was conducted, in the next chapter literature on professional learning, leadership and RECs is reviewed. This analysis establishes the conceptual framework for the study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction to the Chapter

In the previous chapter, the research context and problem were introduced. The purpose of Chapter two is to present a critical synthesis and analysis of the literature that underpins the aims of this research identified in Chapter one. The literature review provides a context for better understanding the leadership role of the REC in professional learning and thereby explores possible relevant avenues to improve teacher and student learning in RE. This chapter also presents a framework within which the theory generated from this study can be discussed and analysed.

The Conceptual Framework for the Review of the Literature

There is a vast range of literature relevant to this study and the issues identified in the literature are complex, as is the task of better understanding the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of RE teachers in the Catholic primary context. A guide to the conceptual framework of the literature review is provided in *Figure 2:1*. In this review three significant areas are addressed: (i) professional learning (ii) leadership for learning and (iii) the role of RECs. The conceptual diagram (*Figure 2:1.*) offers a simple framework to guide the literature analysis. The interconnected, non linear structure highlights the view that all these domains are vital to this study and are interdependent within the total learning culture of a Catholic primary school.

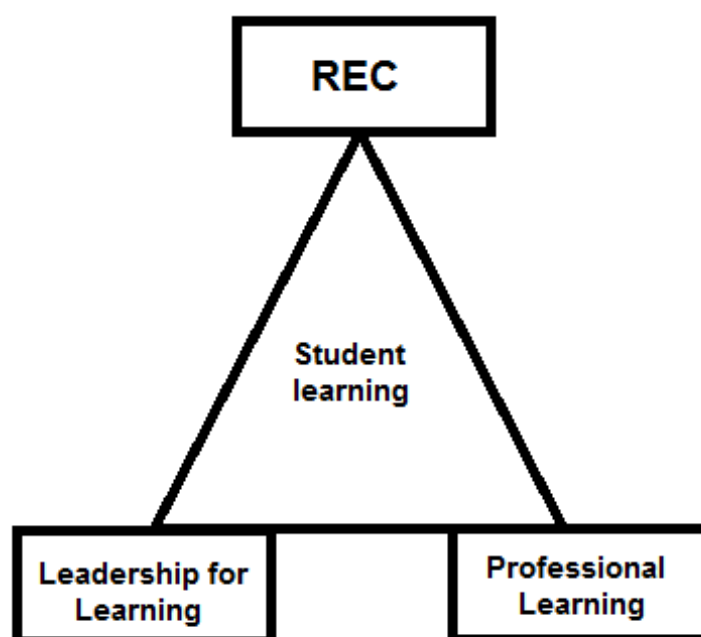


Figure 2:1. Conceptual Framework for the Literature Review

The **REC** is at the top of this conceptual diagram since he or she is the focus of this study. To take seriously the increased demand for accountability in RE, which affects all Catholic schools, leaders and particularly classroom teachers, it is necessary to present the main documents, records and research that influence the REC position in order to better understand the responsibilities, expectations and realities of the role. Successful educational religious leadership should stimulate learning for staff and students. Consequently **leadership for learning** in RE informs this study as a framework for examining the nature and quality of the educational leadership role of the REC. Mounting research (Hattie, 2009; Mulford, 2006) confirmed that for student learning to improve, teachers have to learn too. **Professional learning** therefore can be key to improving the quality of RE. An appreciation of how the leadership role of the REC might influence religious teachers' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes and causally have an impact on their domain of practice -the RE classroom- requires erudition of effective professional learning in the RE context. If RECs as leaders know how to engage teachers and students in effective learning, the school becomes the center of learning for all RE staff and students. As **student learning** is the very reason schools exist and student learning in RE, as has been argued in the previous chapter, is an essential function of a Catholic primary school, it must remain at the centre of this study and be core to all other aspects of this diagram. It is the interplay of these themes which can lead to quality

teaching in RE and guide the vision of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning.¹ The order in which these categories are treated begins with professional learning, moves to an appreciation of leadership for learning and concludes with an examination of the RECs' role. The order of this discussion is in keeping with the data collection obtained in this study which is explained in more detail in Chapter three.

Professional Learning- an overview

For any efforts to improve professional learning in RE to succeed, it is essential to review the literature to establish and critique the possibilities of professional learning in RE, so that what it means is better able to be described, understood and valued. In seeking to better understand effective professional learning for religious educators this section surveys parent literature on professional learning, influential theories and models of professional learning and considers empirical studies into professional learning. Against this background it is possible to situate the potential of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning.

Life Long Learning, Professional Learning and System Initiatives

Life long learning (LLL) has been recognized by many countries and organisations as an essential strategy for meeting the challenges of this millennium (Aspin, et al., 2012; Billett, 2007; European Commission, 2010; OECD, 2008). According to various educators, governing bodies, accreditation organisations, employers and even the general public, LLL is a powerful path for professionals who want to continuously improve their performance and adapt to ever accelerating change in their fields of practice. Indeed it can be argued that one of the hallmarks of being identified as a professional is not only to continue learning throughout a career, but also to deepen knowledge and skills, stay abreast of pertinent developments in the field and experiment with innovations that promise improvements in practice (Sykes, 1990). In teacher education, an understanding that professional learning is a career long activity has taken root. As evidenced in a progression of international reports (OECD 1998, 2005a, 2005b, 2011), concern with the role of education and schooling in the

¹ Sections of this chapter have been published.

Dowling, E. (2012). An investment in our future: reimagining professional learning for religious educators. *Religious Education Journal of Australia* 28(1), 23-29.

global knowledge economy emphasises the need to support teachers' lifelong learning opportunities. Teachers are viewed as important social and economic assets to a nation, responsible for building human and social capital in schools (Metz, 2008). To this end it can be argued that teacher knowledge, as human capital in the classroom, is a critical factor influencing student achievement (King & Newman, 2001). Indeed much has been written about the new knowledge and skills that teachers need to be continually learning and relearning. In the Australian context lifelong learning, as reported in *Australia's Teachers: Australia's Future* (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003) was characterised by "high quality and pertinent professional learning and development opportunities" (p. 39).

An ongoing concern of many countries for the professional growth of their teachers is evidenced in a substantial commitment of funds, study, research and literature. An influential report *Teachers Matter* (OECD, 2005a, p. 20) noted "Professional development of teachers is a key policy lever". All twenty five participating countries were unanimous that participation in professional development activities is considered "beneficial in career progression" (p. 123), whilst conceding there is "very little knowledge about the nature and extent of professional development as an activity" (p. 127).

Numerous ongoing government reports and studies have reiterated the importance of, and need for quality teacher professional development. Barber and Mourshed (2007, p. 8) claimed "The quality of the education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers". Further afield in the United States, the work of Nye, Konstantanopoulos, and Hedges (2004) revealed that teacher effects were "certainly large enough to have policy significance" (p. 254). That professional learning for educators is a necessary vehicle for enhancing student outcomes was validated in a policy brief by Hanushek (2005, p. 9) who claimed, "The most likely way to improve student performance is to improve the quality of teachers". This imperative is apparent across numerous countries and confirmed a global concern for quality teaching and learning. This sentiment has been acknowledged by Parr (2007, p. 22): "a rare consensus has emerged amongst politicians, policy-makers, researchers, teacher educators and teachers across the Western world about the need to give higher priority to *teachers'* learning in order

to improve *students'* learning.² This mounting evidence indicated that policy makers and system and school leaders have a responsibility to ensure that educators within schools engage in continuous professional learning and, more importantly, apply that learning to increase student achievement.

Like governments across the globe, Australia is committed to effective professional development in order to support student learning, teacher learning and teacher-educator research and policy learning this is especially evident in the highly publicised *National Plan for School Improvement* (Australian Government, 2013). Extending this commitment Australian policy makers are increasingly requiring evidence about the effects of professional learning on classroom practice and on student outcomes. Extensive government intervention in education with the express aim to raise the quality, professionalism and status of teachers and school leaders is demonstrated in major federal initiatives such as, The *Australian Government Quality and Teacher program* (AGQTP) and the *National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership* (NIQTSL, 2003). That teacher professional learning should extend to school leadership roles is of particular interest to this study when investigating the potential of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. This is consistent with various overseas jurisdictions (England, 2002; Canada, 2008; Scotland, 2005) that have created compulsory standards for educational and managerial expertise which must be attained as a condition of eligibility for a school leadership positions. Some Australian CEOs reflect international best practice as they have stipulated that RECs need regulated tertiary studies as a prerequisite to a senior RE leadership position (Buchanan, 2013). This practice, however, is not universal in Catholic education throughout Australia. It is not currently the case for current RECs in the Melbourne Archdiocese.

Since the 1990's regulatory frameworks have provided a basis for higher expectations of professional development and accountability. *The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Training* [MCEET] (2008) confirmed how Australian Governments work with all school sectors "to attract, *develop, support* and retain a high- quality teaching and

²For example, Department of Education and Training [DE&T]2004; NITL, 2005, in Australia; The US Department of Education, 2007, in the US; General Teaching Council for England [GTCE], 2004, Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas & Wallace, 2005, in the UK; Ministry of Education, 2006, in New Zealand. See also Cochran-Smith, 2006; Lovat, 2003; OECD, 2005; and Siniscalco, 2005.

leadership workforce in Australian schools”. Professional learning is a common strategy used worldwide to ensure that educators and leaders continue to strengthen their practice throughout their career.

The importance of continuous professional learning is instilled as teachers are prepared to enter the profession and reinforced thereafter. In all Australian states regulatory bodies (such as the VIT and the New South Wales Institute of Teachers [NSWIT]), require that a teacher has registration before employment and this is enforced through an accreditation processes. Such regulations demand that teachers account for their ongoing professional learning at regular intervals throughout their career. For example, a present pre-requisite of the VIT is for teachers to maintain 100 hours of professional learning every five years in order to remain certified. Whilst this initiative is commendable, based on evidence from a wide range of education stakeholders at a state, national and international level, the Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, *Inquiry Into Effective Strategies For Teacher Professional learning*, (2009) highlighted a key concern that the VIT "regulates only the quantity of professional learning that Victorian teachers undertake, not its quality" (p. xii). However there are continuing questions around the definition, enactment and quality of professional learning for educators, an issue which is developed in the following sections of this chapter.

Changing Understandings- an elusive definition

In chapter one a simple definition of professional learning was initially provided for the purpose of establishing key terminology present in this research. However the literature review reveals that professional learning is a sufficiently complex concept to defy a simple definition. Defining professional learning is problematic as differing perspectives and concerns have shaped and continue to shape an understanding of the term. Perceptions of teacher professional development and what constitutes professional development have undergone change over the years with a shift in perception of the manner in which this learning is exercised. What can be claimed with some certainty is that conceptions of professional learning are changing and knowledge and research in this area are expanding.

A starting point for a definition was obtained with the thesaurus of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database; *professional development* refers to "activities to enhance professional career growth." The term is commonly used in the literature to

describe opportunities for a teacher to engage in ongoing learning with a view to improving their knowledge and practice. Typically this term is used interchangeably with other terms such as ‘teacher learning,’ ‘teacher development,’ ‘staff development,’ ‘and ‘in-service education’. These traditional models of professional development were often viewed as telling *teachers what to do* through continuing education and training, in-service education, as well as *one off* programs, curriculum days and conferences. Past research (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Lovitt & Clarke, 1988) provided convincing evidence that “one shot” professional development activities have limited value. More recent arguments confirmed that some professional development offerings were presented as “one hit wonders” with a focus on the latest trend (Hawley & Valli, 2009). Researchers, Bahr et al., (2007) reported considerable evidence that one-off events seldom have any impact on teachers and their practice as they fail to induce long lasting changes in teacher behaviour. Research from the last two decades also indicated that the aforementioned models were considered fragmented and poorly coordinated and unrelated to teachers’ daily work (Desimone, Porter, Birman, Darling Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Guskey, 2002; Ingvarson, 2002). Further other researchers have suggested that teacher learning can be “a short-term, ad hoc, and highly situated endeavour” (Zwart et al., 2009, p. 254). These inadequacies are compounded by claims (Birman, Desimone, Porter & Garet, 2000) that unless adequate time can be given, it would be better not to provide the program at all.

Research supports that ideally professional learning activities should be spread over time, as it takes time to apply new knowledge to practice, reflect on responses from students and colleagues and revise the new approach to suit the local context. Short professional learning activities may be useful in providing teachers with new information, but additional follow-up is necessary for significant change to teachers’ practices and beliefs for improvement in student achievement to occur (NSW Department of Education & Communities - Professional Learning and Leadership Development Directorate, 2013).

It is increasingly apparent that both the definition and quality of professional learning activities are highly contentious areas. An understanding of this terminology is at best tentative and evolving and has been explored from a variety of perspectives as the following paragraphs demonstrate.

Content Focus

Some associate professional development with the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Guskey, 2002). For educators, the professional knowledge base refers to the structure of teachers' knowledge; how knowledge is organised. Research has demonstrated that content focus may be influential and there is evidence to identify the link between professional learning that concentrates on subject matter content and how students learn that content with increases in teachers' knowledge, skills and improvements in practice (McCaughtry, 2005).

Shulman (1986) pioneered a theoretical framework for components of teachers' knowledge known as *pedagogical content knowledge* (PCK). PCK is the construction of interrelated knowledge that includes two or more of the following, a teacher's knowledge of students, content, curricular goals, instructional techniques and materials and content (Hashweh, 2005). National and international trends in professional learning emphasise the importance of content knowledge (Snow, et al., 2005). In the Australian context of RE, many scholars have signalled the importance and value of content knowledge for RE teachers if they are to be successful in their educational endeavours in the RE classroom (Dowling, 2012; Ryan & Grajczonek, 2008; Rymarz, 2012).

Others tend to equate professional development with personal growth and self directed learning opportunities (Turner & Harkin, 2003). Increasingly it is viewed as the integration of both individual and organisational development (Senge, 2006) a concept explored in more detail later in this literature review. Despite the range in perspectives the need for substantial professional development for all teachers is widely recognised and valued, dating as far back as 1975 (Stenhouse) and this view continues (OECD, 2004, 2011; Ingvarson, Meirers & Beavis, 2005). These varying perspectives can be explained according to Kydd, Anderson and Newton (2003), in terms of shifting contexts: "Understandings are controversial, contested and always contingent on the social, economic and political conditions in which they occur" (p. 30).

Important Change in Vocabulary

As has been stated in Chapter one the term 'professional learning' is distinct from 'professional development', though in literature they often appear interchangeably, which can cause confusion. Despite its common usage, recently Fullan (2007) claimed: "Professional

development as a term and a strategy has run its course” (p. 35). “That which used to be described as professional development is now often termed professional learning” (Loughran, 2010, p. 200). However the replacement of one term with another is not useful unless the difference in meaning is apparent. New ways of thinking about and implementing what was once called professional development have emerged moving beyond discrete activities such as workshops, in services and conferences, to newer, more complex and broad-based views on how to conceptualize teachers’ professional learning. In practical terms a comparison between the two terms provided in Table 2.1. illustrates a shift in understandings and practice.

Table 2.1.

Comparison between traditional teacher professional development and alternatives forms of teacher professional learning

Traditional types of teacher Professional Development	Alternative forms of teacher Professional Learning
Formal in-service programs where workshops and programs were delivered off site by so called experts	On site action research/learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Robinson & Lai, 2006)
Ad hoc, on the job training, disconnected from schools overall improvement plan	Ongoing professional learning modules in the context of schooling (DET, 2005)
Teachers were talked at and had a passive role (Ingvarson & Kleinheinz, 2006)	Communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) Active Professional learning organisations (Collison & Cook, 2007), communities, (Schmoker , 2006; Hord & Sommers, 2008), teams, (Johnson, 2003; Earl & Katz, 2005)
Individual theory based learning	Team/community problem based learning (Clarke & Erickson, 2006).

This comparison highlights that the term professional learning more accurately reflects the holistic notion of teachers’ as learners. Cole (2004, p. 4) confirmed: “Professional learning, rather than professional development, seems a more helpful construct to drive teacher improvement”. The distinctiveness of professional learning from professional development is that it supports educators in directing their own professional growth (Loughran, 2010). A significant difference is a commitment to the process with an expectation that teachers bring their expert judgement to bear on how the learning will best be implemented in their own context and practice. Consequently professional learning demands a more comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ effectiveness in raising student

achievement. This broader definition considers the ongoing development of teachers and teaching that goes beyond the term 'training' with its implications of learning skills, and includes formal and informal means of helping teachers not only learn new skills, but also develop new insights into pedagogy and their own practice, and explore new or advanced understandings of content and resources and most importantly student learning. The NSW Department of Education and Communities (2012) affirmed: "The potential for teacher professional learning lies in the fostering of new ways of thinking about content and new approaches to teaching that will substantially impact on student achievement over a sustained period of time" (no page number in original).

Essential Prerequisite

Whilst an agreed definition of teacher professional development appears elusive, scholars seem unanimous that professional development is deemed effective when its impact can be demonstrated on the ultimate goal – student learning (Hord, 2004). In America, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) stated that the purpose of staff development is increased student achievement. Multiple sources appear in agreement that professional learning for teachers has an important role in promoting positive learning outcomes for students and raising educational standards (Darling–Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Fullan, 2007; Meirers & Ingvarson, 2005; OECD, 2009). Conversely these claims must be tempered by other scholars who suggested that they do not have sufficient evidence to indicate which features of professional development are effective for eliciting improvements in student learning (Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen & Garet, 2008). Further the links between teachers' professional development and improved outcomes for students warrant further investigation (Meirers & Ingvarson, 2005; Timperley et al., 2010). This debate validates the need and concern for this research in the RE context, to identify how regulatory bodies (CEOs), principals and RECs value professional learning in RE and support teacher learning in order to improve student learning.

By directly linking professional learning with student improvement it is acknowledged that professional learning must include support for teachers as they encounter the challenges that come with putting into practice their evolving understandings about RE classroom education. These supports help teachers to continue to grow in their professional skills, understandings, and interests. It is a better understanding of exactly what these supports may be for RE teachers in the Catholic primary context which drives this research.

These assertions are supported by research (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Hopkins, 1990), which demonstrated that teachers with greater capacity for integrating multiple points of view, i.e., their own perspective with others' perspectives, are four times more likely to implement a new instructional strategy than teachers with less ability to integrate multiple points of view.

A recent study in the Australian context identified three local factors within schools that can positively influence the effect of professional learning in changing teaching practice and beliefs leading to improved student outcomes. According to Hochberg and Desimone (2010) these include trust, effective leadership and staff collegiality. Whether these are translated to the RE context is yet to be confirmed.

The discussion so far, has identified the movement from the dominance of individualistic approaches to teacher learning to the integration of individual and group (i.e. school) learning where teachers are empowered to critique and challenge their work and to take responsibility for their students' learning. This distinction is significant for this study. Successful professional learning, according to Bahr et al., (2007), is a process not an event. Fullan (2005) concurred that capacity building which is implied in the aforementioned understanding of professional learning, "is the daily habit of *working together* and you can't learn this from a workshop or course (italics in original)" (p. 69). The notion of capacity building is explored in more detail later in this review.

The clear distinction between professional development and professional learning calls for a renewed focus on the conditions for deep learning (Fullan, 2007). This is an area of concern in a subsequent section. Both contemporary literature and research have strongly indicated that professional learning is just a part of a much larger process of learning. Further the altered definition specified that professional learning should have a direct impact on a teacher's classroom practices and student achievement. Consequently RE stakeholders must seriously consider whether professional learning for the RE teacher, as it is generally conceived and practised, has an impact on improved student learning. Further this definition suggests that a key factor for deliberation may be the extent to which the impact of professional learning in RE is measured and monitored in the Catholic primary context.

Enactment of Professional Learning in the Primary Context

The review so far has identified that teacher learning comes in a multitude of formal and informal, embedded and discrete activities among teachers which can act as powerful mechanisms for teacher growth and development (Little, 1999; 2002). Borko's (2004) description of the myriad of contexts for teacher learning makes it obvious that there is no one "perfect" approach to professional learning as the content processes and contextual variables differ. A key message to emerge from the recent 2009 Victorian Government inquiry pertinent to this study was that: "no single model of professional learning is sufficient in itself" (p. v). It also confirmed that learning should be informed by, and evaluated against evidence of how professional learning activities have contributed to demonstrable improvements in teaching practice and student learning. Perhaps the lively theoretical and practical debates on the different approaches to professional learning help explain the continuing questions about how it should be best enacted for educators in schools in Australia, and more particular to this study, primary religious educators in the Catholic school context.

Delivery Models for Teacher Professional Learning

Whilst it is impossible to represent the entire range of professional learning and practices in primary educational settings and contexts, it is necessary to appreciate the diversity of approaches and critique the models which claim to support both staff and student learning. Approaches to teacher professional growth have been described with differences identified according to who sets the agenda, as well as who controls the process and content (Richardson & Hamilton, 1994). Professional learning approaches, according to Allen & Blythe (2004), generally fall into three main categories. Both views are compared in the following Table 2.2.

Table 2.2.
Approaches to professional development

Richardson & Hamilton, (1994)	Allen & Blythe, (2004)
Externally drive (often mandated)	Direct instruction: training sessions in particular types of curriculum strategies and assessment practices.
Teacher initiated	Mentoring/coaching: teachers typically working with a peer or more experienced educator who provides direct and individual feedback to help improve practice.
Collaborative	Collegial conversations and reflection: critical friends/groups, teacher inquiry groups and groups that use protocols to look at student and teacher work.

This table demonstrates that a collegial culture is a precondition in both approaches. A new emphasis in educational change is based on creating the conditions to develop the capacity of both organisation and individuals to learn. This moves away from an emphasis on structural change towards changing the culture of classrooms and schools which is in stark contrast to the previous emphasis on a simplistic linear model of change. There is an increasing emphasis on mentoring, coaching and shadowing type programs and approaches to professional learning, which can be achieved through problem solving with guidance from an expert (Anderson et al., 2008; Barnett & O' Mahoney, 2008). Spillane, (2009) argued for change in the external *top down* approach to professional development which does little to promote student learning (Brady & Kennedy, 2007; Elmore, 2007). Likewise the 2009 Victorian Government study postulated "a preference was widely expressed for inquiry based, action orientated learning over "top down" delivery styles" (2009, p. xii). Similar sentiments have been echoed recently in the Australian RE context where research investigated RE curriculum change in the Tasmanian context (Healy, 2011; Harvey, 2009). These studies confirmed that professional learning initiatives need to establish a balance between promoting coherence across and providing autonomy to individual schools.

Recent history and practice suggests optimum professional learning is increasingly becoming more school focussed. Yet many proponents as early as the eighties, Rosenholtz, (1989) noted the importance of teachers' workplace factors in the discussion of teaching

quality. His work maintained that teachers who felt supported in their ongoing learning and classroom practices were more committed and effective than those who did not receive such confirmation. Fullan also promoted a “redesign of the workplace so that innovation and improvements are built into the daily lives of teachers” (Fullan, 1991, p. 353). Given this increased and pronounced interest in context based approaches to professional learning, the next section analyses the literature to consider how to best support and promote RE teachers’ ongoing professional learning at a school level.

Whole school Approaches to Professional Learning

Schools as learning organisations

As early as (1990) Senge, borrowing from the business world, described a core tenet of a learning organisation as “people continually expand(ing) their capacity to create desired results” (p. 3). The tenet of Organisational Learning (OL) is defined as the “deliberate use of individual, group and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organisation in ways that support shared aims” (Collison & Cook, 2007, p. 8). It is action based and epitomises the need to attend to individual and group learning, growth and fulfilment. Given the widespread appeal of OL and its rapid development, the concept has since migrated to the field of education and has had wide appeal. The pursuit of OL in schools has become increasingly compelling and promoting adults’ learning and extending it to the organisational level requires serious study and attention (Senge, 2006). Strong advocates of this approach (Collison & Cook, 2007, p. 8) reinforced that OL is “highly relevant to today’s educational organisations and provides a powerful path for schools wanting to continuously improve learning, teaching and leading to benefit all members”.

Senge’s seminal perspective was applied to education with a specific caveat that the organization’s focus should be *on learning* as opposed to simply improving the efficiency of an organization’s infrastructure. With this intent organisational literature has proposed conditions that foster OL in school settings. These include: a) prioritizing learning for all members; b) fostering inquiry; c) facilitating the dissemination (sharing) of knowledge; d) practising democratic principles; e) attending to human relationships and f) providing for members’ self fulfilment (Collison & Cook, 2007, p. 60). These conditions reiterated that OL may be one valid and necessary building block for school improvement to enable staff to

develop shared knowledge regarding best practice and classroom context. The puzzle and challenge for those responsible for quality learning in RE is that, whilst this general educational theory is helpful, whether it can succeed and be sustained in the practice of the Catholic primary RE settings is yet to be determined to any extent.

The term *learning community* has now also become an accepted part of educational discourse. In educational circles the use of this term to describe a school is commonplace. Similar to OL, learning communities demand strategic intent and collective responsibility. A learning community operates on the premise that schools need to become learning communities where everyone is a learner and the school itself learns. In 2011, the Minister for Education, the Hon. Martin Dixon, MP delivered a special lecture at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education; The University of Melbourne entitled *Towards Victoria as a Learning Community-position paper*. The special lecture laid out the Victorian Government's broad vision for school education reform, with a focus on autonomy, professional trust and partnerships.

The concept of communities of practice (CoP) is valuable among educational researchers when we take account of the number of studies that reference it. Wenger (1998) argued that workers function most effectively as CoP. His conception is that schools and staff should operate as a shared enterprise, a community bound together by a mutual sharing of beliefs. Research has repeatedly underscored the need for schools to operate as learning communities (Darling- Hammond, 1996; Du Four, Du Four & Eaker, 2009; Hattie, 2009; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999; Stoll, 2010) as they provide a wealth of advantages, namely they can have an impact on the student learning process and progress, individual teachers' practice, as well as OL practices.

Wenger and his colleagues have been clear that a CoP can take many forms, in terms of different group sizes, locations, statuses of the individuals involved, and formats for interaction (Wenger, 2006). They also suggested that online social networks can often be identified as CoP (Wenger, 2006; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). That is the notion of communities of learners may also exist as virtual communities of learning through learning management systems such as MyClasses (EduNET), online forums, online journals, online meetings, social networking, Wikis and Blogs. The possibility to extend professional

communities of learning beyond the confines of a school community is examined later in this chapter when online professional learning opportunities are analysed.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are also posited as unique learning opportunities in educational forums, which strive to develop collaborative work cultures for teachers (Schleicher, 2012). The term PLC has a specific meaning in that it relates to teachers and leaders in school settings continuously sharing professional experiences in structured ways and then acting on what they learn to enhance their effectiveness as professionals to benefit student learning (Harris & Jones, 2011). It may be argued that the basics of PLCs are not new as teachers have long been sharing ideas and resources. A key difference is that a PLC provides a more organised, structured and focussed approach to this collegial practice. Reichstetter (2006) described PLCs as “made up of team members who regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision” (p. 1). If schools wish their staff to become “mindful practitioners” as Fullan, (2008) suggests, then they need to continue to structure opportunities for mindful conversations. The concept of PLCs rests on the premise of improving student learning by improving student practice (Lomos et al., 2011). Bolam et al., (2005) confirmed that PLCs have “the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing student learning” (p. 145).

Current professional development literature is replete with articles that extol the virtues of PLCs as an essential way to maximize time spent in professional development (DuFour, 2009, 2008; Reeves, 2005). This advocacy is typified by Schmoker (2006), who contended that PLCs are “arguably the best, most agreed upon means by which to continuously improve instruction and student performance” (no page numbers in original).

This model offers professional learning situated within the interplay between educational policies and the realities of schools and practising teachers (Mc Laughlin & Talbert, 2006). Within a PLC, emphasis is placed on *participation* in this community of practitioners, rather than merely on the acquisition of skills or practices. PLCs are grounded in two important assumptions. First they are situated within the day to day experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same

experience (Buysse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003). Second, actively engaging teachers in PLCs will simultaneously increase professional knowledge and enhance student learning (Harris & Jones, 2011). This perhaps explains the trend in recent decades towards more site based professional learning communities (Schmoker, 2006; State of Victoria, 2012).

Bolam et al., (2005), provided a view of a PLC that contained a detailed and useful framework for adoption in schools. It consist of eight elements: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for student learning; collaborative focus on learning; group as well as individual learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, network and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support. These elements are repeated by other scholars. Hord's (1997; 2004) extensive literature review, *Professional learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement* focused on building a PLC among the entire staff and recognized five distinct dimensions. Newman et al., (1996) also proposed five characteristics. Both are compared in the Table 2.3. The similarities are highlighted in grey shading with direct words highlighted in a darker shade of grey.

Table 2.3.
Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

Hord (1997, 2004)	Newman et al., (1996)
Supportive and shared leadership;	clear and consistent focus on student learning;
Shared values and visions ;	shared values and norms;
Collective learning and application (formerly identified as collective creativity);	reflective dialogue that leads to "extensive and continuing conversations among teachers about curriculum, instructions and student development"(p.182)
Supportive conditions and environments ;	Collaboration;
Shared personal practice.	deprivatising practice.

These interconnected dimensions, although expressed slightly differently, recur in professional learning literature. They point to two sets of conditions that facilitate and support effective PLCs. These are physical conditions and human conditions or structural conditions and social and human resources (Fullan, 2006).

The construct allows ongoing and collective learning of the entire school faculty (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Empirical studies on PLCs have also received increasing attention (Vescio et al., 2008) and have led to positive results for both teachers and students. A small but impressive body of evidence demonstrated that students can benefit when school teachers form PLCs (Du Four, Du Four & Eaker, 2008; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). However, this claim needs some qualification. The factors which underpin the operation of the PLC must be maintained and sustained and are too important to be left to chance. The support and direction offered in a PLC needs to be purposeful, serving the local needs of school participants. The whole philosophy of a PLC is people working together, each member wanting the other to succeed in daily interactions with all school stakeholders. Du Four, Du Four & Eaker (2008) noted numerous challenges which mitigate against establishing a new culture including failure to implement, leadership disconnect, and data rich/information poor to which they gave the acronym DRIP.

The literature reviewed so far has suggested that a great deal of untapped knowledge about teaching and learning resides within the school itself (Killion & Harrison, 2006). A recent Victorian Government report recommended the need to “prioritise school based modes of delivery for teacher professional learning” (2009, p. 89). Professional learning should demonstrate values, knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the discipline and/or profession (Eraut, 1994; Turner, 2006). The literature appears to postulate a common theme on the idea of collaboration, positively associated with student learning. Indeed evidence suggests professional learning undertaken in isolation from teachers’ ongoing classroom responsibilities has little impact on teaching practice and student learning (Collopy, 2003). The literature points out that future and current professional learning needs to exhibit certain conditions. This study investigated whether RECs knew and understood conditions that were responsive to the ways in which RE teachers learn.

The need to learn collaboratively in context is a vexing enduring issue. As far back as 1975, Stenhouse claimed “Each classroom is a laboratory, each teacher a member of a

scientific community” (p. 142). Yet thirty years later, much has been reported about the desirability of making the school the primary unit for staff and curriculum development. Elmore (2004, p. 127) lamented: “There is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice in the setting in which they actually work”. Schmoker (2006) citing Japan and Germany claimed that other countries learned this long ago. Cole (2005) agreed that school based learning opportunities develop a learning culture that promotes risk taking, collaboration and team learning through sharing of teaching strategies. Scholars (Barth, 2006; Schlechty, 2005; *The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future*, 2003) have built a strong case for nurturing a collaborative culture of professional learning, recognising the strong social component and synergy that can result. Educational workplaces should be marked by professional and collegial relationships between and among colleagues, who view one another both as a stimulus and resource for continued professional learning (Elmore, 2007; Schlechty, 2005; Sparks, 2007). The degree of collaboration among teachers was also identified by Grant and Murray (2002) as a factor which aided the provision of professional development opportunities for teachers to discuss their practices, offer each other support and critical feedback and conduct experiments to test their practices. They claimed “Schools where extensive collaboration is the norm are often more successful than those where teachers collaborate less” (2002, p. 186). Despite this requirement, *The Australian Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education* (2003) suggested that this is not universally accepted or practised. It appears that much remains to be done to translate this principle into effective practice.

Of significance to this study is that some recent professional development initiatives of the CEOM were deliberately situated in the context of the school environment. These initiatives included funding and structures to enable ample opportunity for RE teachers to learn in the setting in which they work. This approach may help to establish links between what is learnt in professional development and the actual implementation in classrooms and removes some of the barriers between teacher learning and student success. However, cost/benefit analyses of these system initiatives are virtually non existent in the literature or in reports from these organisations. Whilst anecdotal evidence and personal experience indicate that informal continuous evaluation and modification of RE professional learning programs and supports occurs, this study provides descriptive information to help review the quality and success of professional learning in the primary RE context, and add to the nascent literature in this area. Of further significance, despite the well founded and accepted notion of

school based professional learning, anecdotal observations indicate that the present structure and organisation of some Catholic schools run counter to desirable collaborative educational practice particularly in RE. The lack of willingness to de-privatize teaching practices presents a challenge to the collective learning of teachers. This study provides an opportunity to consider the extent of this situation for RE in the Catholic primary setting.

Teacher isolation – a longstanding problem- fact or fiction?

Any discussion of professional learning must take into consideration a key aversion to collaborative teacher learning and that is the prevailing issue of the privacy of teaching which has been noted by many over the years (de Lima, 2001; Grossman et al., 2001; Schmoker, 2006; Du Four, Du Four & Eaker, 2008). These sources confirmed the reality in schools that some teachers are noted for their ability to shut the door and work independently. There is evidence that some teachers have worked for many years in isolation and attempts to deprivatise the practice of teachers have yet to be universally accepted. Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, (2005, p. 4) confirmed: “It is time to end the practice of solo teaching in isolated classrooms”. Whilst a strong case has been forwarded that teachers should move their professional learning out of the privacy of the classroom and into a forum that allows for open and critical discussion and learning, for a variety of reasons (including the logistical structure and size of a school, the commitment of funds and time, lack of support from administration and reluctance of staff) schools allow their staff to seek to teach in isolation. This isolation is evidenced in studies by Clandinin and Connelly (1995) and Elmore (1996). The extent of this issue in RE has yet to be investigated in detail. In order to break down traditional RE classroom isolation and network teachers into ongoing school based learning communities, Catholic schools need to find ways to move beyond these constraints. Embedded in this research is the need to question and reflect on the accountability of RE teachers for collaborative learning, professional learning, student learning and growth.

Collaborative partnerships between schools, professional associations and university educators can also result in effective PD for teachers (Hardy, 2008; Paris, 2010). Moss (2008, p. 345) reinforced this sentiment and suggested “when considering how to build local learning communities, school and university partnerships are seen as offering rich possibilities for transformative professional action”. This review has highlighted that the school itself is one source amongst an array of milieux, sites and locations to which RE

teachers seek growth and advancement in their own knowledge, understanding and skills in RE. In addition to onsite and external learning partnerships, web based technology has recently emerged as a very powerful professional learning tool too.

Online professional learning opportunities

The rapid and almost ubiquitous presence of Information Communication technology (ICT) suggests that it offers untold potential and new options for professional learning with online, semi online sessions and blended learning sessions (Garrison, & Vaughan, 2008), to name but a few opportunities available to teachers. Recently, Aspin and Chapman (2012) confirmed the exponential growth of opportunities “afforded by developments in the world of information technology and communication (p. 1). According to Gronn (2011, p. 13) “Educations systems all over the world have invested considerable amounts of money into hardware, software, infrastructure and professional development for teachers”. In the Joint Ministerial Statement on *Information and Communications Technologies in Australian Education and Training*: (2008-2011), “Technologies are powerful tools for education and training. They are enabling the transformation of the curriculum and changing the way learners and educators operate, learn and interact” (p. 2), it becomes evident that the value of ICT cannot be overstated. The specific commitment to technology in Catholic primary schools is evident in numerous ways including but not limited to Twitter and Scootle Communities, Classroom Blogs, Digital Stories, Video Editing Technologies, wikis, ipods and websites. Given the interest and investment in ICT and its potential for RE, it is necessary to consider the significance of ICT professional learning in the RE context.

A variety of literature has espoused the benefits of delivering online professional development for teachers. Dede et al., (2005) identified over 400 empirical studies of online teacher professional development courses however at the same time it is noted that the application of online learning for the professional learning of teachers is relatively new compared with its use in other areas of higher education. Further whilst it may be claimed that there is an abundance of quality digital teaching material available (Lee, 2008), the challenge for RE teachers is to sift out the good from the plethora of options available.

One early model of online learning (1985) Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow (ACOT) found that teacher development approaches that had the most impact have the following

defining features. They involved *small group collaborations; took place in working classrooms; built on teachers' existing knowledge; *provided opportunities to experiment and reflect; and *provided ongoing support (p. 3). Within this list, an asterisk, (*) has been used to indicate the principles that have already been identified as relevant to this study. Rodriguez and Knuth (2000) noted that a hands on technology is an essential component of professional development for technology in schools. Their study, the *Components of Effective Professional Development for Technology Use* (Rodriguez & Knuth, 2000) listed components essentials to effective professional learning for technology use in schools, contained 14 considerations. Many of these components have been discussed already in the literature review including the need for active, hands on, collegial, ongoing process, matched with sufficient time, technical assistance and support, resources and funding, and built in evaluation. Current research on teachers' professional learning, including online environments highlights that evaluations of outcomes be framed around "core features" including "Content focus, active learning, coherence, duration and collective participation" (Desimone, 2009, p. 183). The aforementioned research and new modes of working with teachers indicates that virtual online professional learning communities have comparable characteristics to other modes of professional learning previously examined in this literature review.

Lieberman and Mace (2009) advocated the need to capitalise on the time and social investment of online social networking and teacher professional learning and "harness it toward improved student learning outcomes for teachers and students" (p. 86). These sentiments acknowledge that the multimedia online age provides new opportunities to turn the isolation of teachers into professional learning communities. Collaborative Web technologies, often referred to with the term *Web 2.0*, are interactive, Internet technologies, encompassing social networking, blogging, microblogging, media sharing, and other forms of connecting via the Internet (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). Yet Lieberman and Mace (2009) claimed that "the interconnectedness and ground up, user generated world of Web 2.0 has yet to reach into the realm of teacher professional learning" (p. 78).

ICT based communication can help RE staff participate in collaborative learning experiences outside the school. A simple example of a collaborative knowledge making spaces is a Wiki. Schlager, Fusco and Schank (2002) suggested an online community of learners is more than a community of learners but is a community that learns. Professional

learning online allows “a blending of teachers’ workplaces and other communities with their online learning experiences” (Dabner & Davis, 2009, p. 175). It is apparent that an ICT rich professional learning environment may provide a solution to the longstanding dilemma of teacher isolation identified earlier in this chapter.

An obvious benefit of promoting professional learning in a wide range of delivery and participation modes including online is that it can provide an exciting new hub for educators where participants at conferences, workshops and seminars can also become members of an ongoing learning communities (Downes et al., 2002). This enables participants to access course materials and to extend their learning beyond the professional learning event they attend with follow up activities and webinars. Consequently participants can further consolidate what was learnt at training courses/events, and may help to ensure that participating staff get the most out of the professional learning when they return to school (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Such claims are tempered by the research of Drexler, Baralt, and Dawson, (2008) whose studies offer evidence that collaboration, interaction, and learning do not occur automatically in online environments. Such critiques cannot be disregarded.

Another benefit of the online world is the accessibility and flexibility (Sorensen & Takle, 2004), to promote communication with experts, mentors and to collaborate and share ideas with educators across Australia and indeed the world. Open communities for those who wish to collaborate, communicate and share resources means that a range of online professional development strategies and self-evaluation tools can ensure that anywhere, anytime professional learning is available to teachers and leaders at all career stages and all levels of ICT competence. Promoting networks of like-minded teachers is a valuable goal in the search for quality RE. However, whilst the use of ICT allows staff to provide information to others and initiate contact with others, interestingly this is not always the case. A recent study of innovative uses of ICT in many countries found that few projects involve connection and collaboration with others outside of the classroom (Kozma & Mc Ghee, 2003). Further, although there is much evidence that ICT learning creates many openings for professional growth of teachers (Renninger & Shumar, 2002), teachers’ use of such opportunities may be more difficult than it is often assumed, according to Hunter (2002).

For the purpose of this research it is vital to consider the online learning possibilities within the Melbourne Archdiocese. Presently the provision of valuable RE content is

contained within an electronic website provided by the CEOM termed RESource. The website states that it is intended that RESource will encourage the development of online professional learning groups. The CEOM also claims that RE teachers will be able to use both the RESource materials and online collaboration tools to explore and discuss the issues and questions that are raised. In this way, potentially RE staff will also be introduced to the possibilities for curriculum and classroom application of the facilities they are using in their own professional learning and collaboration. However the degree to which this happens is as yet unknown as there appears to be no empirical studies to date, to investigate this phenomenon. Anecdotal feedback and observation leads the researcher to speculate if, in effect RE professional learning that utilises technology is still an innovation, rather than a mainstream activity in the primary RE domain as little analysis has been undertaken. This research provides an opportunity to examine the perceptions and realities of online professional learning in Catholic primary RE settings. Naturally like all other forms of professional learning a key question to be asked of any professional learning provided for RE teachers online is *does it lead to intended changes in teachers' understanding, skills and classroom practice?*

Quality of professional learning experiences

Despite an increased concern from governments and educational organisations to support teachers' ongoing growth with respect to their development as professionals and with a view to student achievement, mounting voices in the wider educational literature question the effectiveness of many professional learning opportunities. An examination of the alleged inadequacies of professional learning in other studies within educational settings sheds light on the possible situation in the primary RE context which is the focus of this study.

Some findings demanded that the concept and practice of professional learning must be completely reconsidered (Borko, 2004; Meirers & Ingvarson, 2005). An evaluation in the Australian context revealed: "Millions of teachers' hours and educational dollars are wasted on teacher professional development-the form of professional development in which most teachers indulge, and the least effective for promoting changed teacher behaviour in the classroom" (Cole, 2004. p. 4). Of further concern was that Cole's work concluded "teacher professional development, as it is generally conceived and practised, has had little impact on improved student learning" (2004, p. 4). For many years now, there appears widespread

agreement that most professional development is ineffective (Elmore, 2004; Little, 1999). Various scholars have highlighted the inadequacies of staff development provided to teachers, epitomised by Borko (2004, p. 3) who declared: “The professional development currently available to teachers is woefully inadequate”. Likewise, Toop, (2013, p. 55) claimed “teacher professional development needs radical overhaul”. An evaluation of 80 individual PD activities undertaken throughout the *Australian Government Quality Teaching Project* (AGQTP) program in 2002 and 2003 found gaps were often evident between the optimal conditions indicated by research evidence and the actual conditions provided for professional learning (Ingvarson et al., 2004). That teacher professional learning occasions, in addition to being in part, ineffective are also expensive of time and money, naturally raises questions about better ways to achieve ongoing learning for educators. Meaningful impact on student RE outcomes cannot be obtained without investigating and addressing the realities of professional learning in RE. This research provides an opportunity to discern if primary RE educators speak with clarity, possibility and accountability.

Whilst continuous learning and improvement in practice should be at the core of teacher professionalism, in many instances this is not so (Sachs, 2006). An Australian report by Coulter and Ingvarson, as far back as 1985, found that the connection between innovations and professional development was often weak (p. 3). Since then capacity building in teacher education has been raised as a serious issue by various commentators (Bassey, 2003; Furlong, 2007) and has yet to be resolved. These claims reflect the ongoing and extensive debate about optimum models to achieve professional growth for educators which will positively affect staff and student learning. The variety of viewpoints suggests that much remains to be learned about the factors that shape teachers’ ability to raise student achievement. The inadequacies identified in different studies validate the need for further research in this area. Such findings are cause for serious concern for all responsible for the learning of teachers and students. No corresponding research appears to exist in the area of professional learning in primary RE in Australia and its direct impact on student learning. This research may address these gaps in knowledge and offer some promising leads for further exploration.

Summary of the Key Characteristics of Effective Professional Learning

The discussion so far has repeated strategic key requirements of effective learning common to the different models presented. These characteristics can be summarised according to the Education Departments in Victoria, Australia (2005) and Ontario, Canada (2007).

The characteristics of effective professional learning are as shown in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4.
Summary Table of Effective Professional Learning

Focused on student outcomes	Coherent
Focused on and embedded in teacher practice	Goal orientated
Informed by the best available research on effective learning and teaching	Attentive to Adult Learning styles
Collaborative, involving reflection and feedback	Sustainable
Evidence based and data driven to guide improvement and to measure impact	Evidence informed
Ongoing, supported and fully integrated into the culture and operations of the system- schools, networks, regions and the centre	
An individual and collective responsibility at all levels of the system and it is not optional	
(Department of Education and Training, 2005, pp. 14-16)	(Report to the Partnership Table on Teacher Professional Learning, 2007, p. 6)

The elements in this table provide a summary of many of the key ingredients identified in the different models of effective professional learning explored so far. It is also possible to recognise the interrelated nature of these characteristics. Recent reports have provided certain perspectives necessary for teacher growth. First, it is based on constructivism whereby the teacher is regarded as someone who learns actively. Second, it is viewed as a long term process where the teacher is a collaborative, reflective practitioner. There is also consensus

that professional learning should be geared to focusing on the needs of student learning where evidence based features are required in high quality professional learning.

The increased attention paid to teacher professional learning has brought a realisation that it can and should take place by a variety of means. Different types of involvement are required for teachers whose needs vary at different stages of their careers. No single professional learning model can be effective and applicable to all schools and contexts. Similarly for optimum professional learning of teachers, an overreliance on one activity should be avoided. The literature therefore indicated that Catholic schools and RE teachers need to evaluate their own needs, beliefs and practices to decide which areas are working well and which models seem more beneficial to them.

The importance of continuous teacher learning is well supported in literature (Berry, Johnson & Montgomery, 2005; European Commission, 2011). That professional learning can improve teachers' effectiveness in raising student achievement is indisputable. There is now a wide range of reliable evidence worldwide (Mulford, 2006; Muijs & Reynolds, 2001) to support the contention that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. The literature is also unanimous that educators must connect their new learnings with the experiences of their students. In doing so individual, group and school learning can result. However, a recent longitudinal study (Bahr, Dole, Bahr, Barton & Davies, 2007) found discrepancies between what is known to be effective as professional learning and what teachers actually experience. Further, despite the increase in interest and knowledge educators have gained about effective professional learning, a gap still exists between perception and reality in schools (Du Four, Du Four, & Eaker, 2008).

This review and analysis has noted that professional learning encompasses individual and organisational dimensions. It can provide long term growth of individuals and the transformation of the school culture itself. Collegial, purposeful professional learning embedded in the ongoing life of the school is required (Wells & Feun, 2007). Establishing and maintaining an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, support and professional growth is essential. Regardless of the designated terms (OL, PLTs, PLCs) teachers can respond to the contradictions and dilemmas of teacher practice as a catalyst for reflection and a foundation for professional learning. For religious educators, who increasingly are

answerable for their students' learning in RE, evidence based school inquiry learning can be a legitimate means to become more accountable for student learning in RE.

There is ample evidence that continuing professional development for teachers is viewed as a priority in education policy (Siniscalco, 2005) and it has been established that literature from around the world has rapidly converged around arguments that professional learning has a key role for teachers. Yet, whilst the importance of teacher professional learning for high quality schooling in Australia remains grounded in literature and research, an agreed understanding of what constitutes professional learning or how professionals learn in and through their RE practice remain unclear.

Implications of Professional Learning Overview for Religious Educators

The range of perspective presented in this section provides a mere snap shot of the lively debate on professional learning in educational circles. Recognition of the need for and value of, professional learning in education has been established. Consequently it has become increasingly evident that for RE teachers to be as effective as possible, they must continually expand their knowledge and skills to implement the best educational practices in RE. An assessment and possible reassessment of traditional RE professional learning practices may be needed to orient practice more towards ongoing teacher and student growth. Strong arguments have decreed that a fundamental tenet of professional learning is related to enhanced student learning. In the pursuit of quality teaching in RE with a measurable impact on student outcomes, the literature highlighted that evidence of both student and teacher learning is necessary.

Growing evidence confirmed that policy makers, system and school leaders have a responsibility to ensure that RE educators within Catholic primary schools engage in continuous professional learning and apply that learning to increase student achievement. At best effective professional learning in RE may yield three levels of results; a) RE educators learn new knowledge and skills through participation; b) RE educators implement what they learn to improve teaching and c) RE student learning and achievement increase because educators use what they learned in professional learning. At worst, RE educators who do not experience effective professional learning opportunities cannot improve their knowledge and skills, and student learning in RE may suffer. Research also indicated that any

misunderstandings or limited traditional notions which may exist about professional learning, its purpose and how it functions will almost certainly have little or no impact for student learning.

Tensions and ambiguity in the parent literature as well as secondary sources and empirical studies about professional learning of educators have been established. Conversely conditions for effective professional learning have been forwarded which may provide helpful audit tools to those responsible for the provision of professional learning for religious educators but these understandings must be further developed to best conceptualise the professional learning of *religious educators* in the Catholic *primary* settings and to plan to provide leadership in implementing effective professional learning experiences for religious educators. This study aims to better understand the process by which RE teachers grow professionally and identify the conditions that support and promote this growth. Increased attention and focused research may help bridge any gap between the rhetoric and the reality of professional learning for religious educators in Catholic primary schools and thus realize the promise of improved teacher and student learning in RE.

These challenges lead to the following question which is explored in this research.

Research Question 1.

According to key stakeholders what models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools?

Leadership for Learning

Introduction

In this section of the literature review an examination of the leadership roles is undertaken to discover how RE leadership can best enable professional learning for primary religious educators. In educational literature, there is common acceptance that leadership is a key factor in schools' and students' educational success (Hattie, 2003, 2009; Murphy, 2008; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). As a result there is a corresponding expectation that RE leaders can and should influence learning. This section establishes that how educational

leaders *lead* in a high stakes accountability environment is critical to the success of both student and staff learning.

That leadership makes important contributions to the improvement of student learning had been evidenced by empirical research on the direct and indirect effects of leadership on student outcomes (Barber et al., 2010; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). The recent OECD (2008) report confirmed the significant impact of school leadership on student learning. *The Leadership for Organisational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) Research Project* (1997- 2000) longitudinal study demonstrated that leadership practices could promote organisational learning in schools. The importance of leadership in securing sustainable school improvement has been illustrated in research. Findings from diverse countries draw similar conclusions about the centrality of leadership to school improvement and the role of head teachers in the creation, management and leadership of culture in schools (Bush, 2003; Catano & Stronge, 2007).

Successful leadership should be measured by the positive impact it has on student learning. In schools that show impressive achievement gains, educational leaders maintain a clear and consistent focus on improving the core task of teaching. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) confirmed that leadership in higher performing schools was “more focused on teaching and learning, a stronger instructional resource for teachers” (pp. 657-8). Whilst a focus on teaching and learning has been promoted in educational leadership and management circles, a wide array of theories have been forwarded to explain which type of leadership will best achieve this result. This review next examines some of these frameworks to explore the implications for RE leadership. What is apparent from literature on leadership is the struggle to discover and articulate forms of leadership most appropriate for the demands of educational settings. This complexity was explained over thirty years ago by Burns (1978, p. 2) who noted “leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth”. Given that leadership is a broad area, for the purpose of this review an examination of leadership theories aimed to improve student learning is the focus of the following sections.

Strategic Leadership

Leadership is a culture influencing activity, “They have the main responsibility for generating and sustaining culture and communicating core values and beliefs both within the

organisation and to external stakeholders”, as Bush (2003, p. 43) expressed it. Advocates of cultural leadership recognise that, because of their position in organisations, strategic leaders have the best perspectives from which to see the dynamics of the culture, and to analyse what should remain and what needs transformation. These leaders appreciate local meaning and encourage work cultures that exemplify shared norms, values beliefs and attitudes (Bush, 2003; Busher, 2006). Whilst there is no one best school culture, recent research and knowledge of successful schools identifies common features. O’Mahoney et al., (2006, p. 22-23) identified these: a) a widely shared sense of purpose and values; b) norms of continuous learning and improvement; c) a commitment to a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students; d) collaborative and collegial relationships; e) opportunities for staff reflection, sharing and collective inquiry; f) common professional language and extensive professional development, and d) ceremonies that celebrate improvement and collaboration. Leadership should attend to the preceding features if the development of a learning culture is to evolve. There has been an increasing emphasis on the links between leadership and the *culture* of an organisation as a route to school improvement (Day et al., 2007). Dimmock and Walker, (2005) claimed: “School culture holds the key to effective management of change and school improvement” (p. 68). Despite this leadership responsibility, Moore (2000, p. 95) contended that “Researchers echo the belief that the social organisation and culture of the school often work against staff learning “. Strategic decisions are planned, long term and help to evolve and reshape ideas and actions (Davies 2007). This has encouraged a view of leadership as *transformational*, having the potential to alter the context in which people work.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978), observed that transformational leadership transforms the social system within which leaders and followers are embedded. Transformational leadership describes leaders who not only manage culture but purposefully have an impact upon the culture in order to change it (Staratt, 2004; Dimmock & Walker, 2005). A leader who encourages the growth and support of others is termed a transformational leader (Giancola & Hutchision, 2005). These leaders design cultures that “help both individuals and teams, departments and divisions work together effectively by sharing the value of cooperation” (Sashkin, 2004, p. 194). This leadership “focuses on individual support; culture; structure; vision and goals; performance expectation; intellectual stimulation” (Mulford & Silens, 2003, p. 179). Through building participative practices leaders provide opportunities for staff to learn from each

other; "The staff development process is one of human resource development" (Moore, 2000, p. 96). Transformational leadership is, therefore, people rather than organisation orientated in attempts to transform culture (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). If behavioural change is desired, it must be preceded and accompanied by cultural re-orientation. Educational leaders help create and support the conditions that promote transformative teaching and learning in schools (Starratt, 2004). Attention to the quality of teaching and student learning is obligatory. This is reinforced in other educational leadership and management models (Eacott, 2007). Transformational action in schools aims for continual improvement. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) stated: "The types of motivational, collaborative, and interpersonal skills that are emphasised in transformational leadership research are essential to leaders' ability to improve teaching and learning" (p. 666).

Instructional Leadership

In looking to optimize the educational role of the REC, it is necessary to explore an understanding of Instructional leadership. Instructional leadership theory had its empirical origins in the late 1970's (Edmonds, 1979) and early 1980's (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan & Lee, 1982). Formerly instructional leadership tended to focus only on the principal (Harchar & Hyle, 1996) however, by the 1990's, studies confirmed the view that the principal's role had moved away from the "instructional leader" model and had been replaced by a whole school leadership concept. This sentiment validates that the REC has a legitimate and important role in staff and student RE learning and is a suitable focus for this study.

Recent research demonstrated a more inclusive focus embracing the notion of shared instructional leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003; Nelson & Sassi, 2005). School improvement is more likely to occur when leadership is distributed and when teachers have a vested interest in leading school improvement (Gronn, 2009). The notion of collaboration, explored in an earlier section of this chapter, has great relevance to this theory. Harcher and Hyle (1996, p. 28) affirmed "Through the practice of collaborative power, instructional effectiveness and educational excellence become the focus of education". Many researchers contend that building teacher instructional capacity is a key factor in improving student learning (Hattie, 2009; Rowe, 2007). However, whilst others may dispute the viability of instructional leadership, Leithwood (1990) claimed that even those "who acknowledge the responsibilities for teacher development often claim that it's not a function they feel capable of performing well" (p. 72).

A different perspective has been discussed by Robinson (2007) who compared transformational leadership and instructional leadership. She concluded that instructional leadership has a greater influence on student learning than transformational leadership. Published empirical studies indicated that the effect of the former is consistently and notably larger than the effect of the latter type of leadership. The more leaders focus on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their likely influence on student learning becomes. Leaders can improve classroom instruction by focusing on building the capacity of their teachers. Mulford & Silins (2003) confirmed "By their actions, or inaction, students, teachers, middle managers, and head teachers help determine the fate of what happens in schools" (p. 175). In this research it is necessary to ascertain whether the REC has a designated and strategic role to improve RE classroom instruction by focusing on building the capacity of RE teachers. It is clear that the more leaders focus on their professional relationships, their work and their learning on teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes. However, for the purpose of this study it appears this leadership theory, research and practice needs to be more closely linked to research on effective teaching in RE, so that there is greater focus on what RECs as leaders need to know and do to support teachers.

Educative Leadership

There is considerable research on educational leadership and increasingly trends in data are more often used as a catalyst for school change. Educative leadership, as defined by Bezzina (2008), is the ability to influence others to enhance student learning. A leader can influence the growth of staff professional learning and promote a culture that resonates with the need for ongoing school improvement.

An understanding of staff professional learning is a valuable asset for all who work in organisations but more so for those who lead them. The success of professional learning will depend, to a great extent, upon the actions of the leader. Leadership must be exquisitely sensitive to the context in which it is exercised. In addition, given their influence, leaders need to be attentive and attuned to the various factors that assist the professional learning, like timetabling, resources and funding to enable the conditions for professional learning to flourish. Kouzes and Posner (2004, p. 24) stated: "Exemplary leaders search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow and improve". There seems little doubt that in

pursuit of improved teacher and student learning a commitment to create favourable workplace conditions for staff is an indispensable leadership task.

A leader should participate in the learning as leader, learner, or both (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Leadership of teacher learning is an essential responsibility which demands commitment and sustained vision. Bezzina (2008) confirmed "Leadership for professional learning is a driver of change and development" (p. 228).

Summary of the role of Leadership in enabling Effective Professional Learning

If the main business of schools is student learning, then it follows that leadership of learning must be a primary task and key to the growing accountability of schools. The latest research in OECD countries demonstrated that in schools with higher achievement, academic improvement is the focus of the leader and school organisation. Leaders support student learning in many ways. Research and numerous scholars confirmed how intricately intertwined leadership behaviour is with culture creation and management (Schein, 2004). Leaders seeking critical points of engagement with the learning agenda must consider how they influence and support the organisation, growth and development of professional learning. In the quest to identify influences on student learning claims about the effects of leadership on learning appear justified.

Role of the REC as Middle Leader in enabling Professional Learning.

In this research it is particularly helpful to understand the way in which leaders other than the principal of a school might influence professional learning. In line with the notion of distributed leadership, in Catholic schools the REC (ideally as part of the leadership team) should be influential in how professional learning is implemented and what focus or priority it has in a school. Whilst the role of the REC is described and evaluated in detail in the next section, educational administration is another function associated with the role of the REC. Administrative leadership, including a management component, has been understood in terms of establishing goals in line with organisational vision and mission, designing structures and procedures that support these objectives, allocating resources to this task and regulating the implementation phase and applying improvement (Bennis, 2007). Thus described this role can complement the leadership functions of aligning, empowering and achieving schools goals. Moreover, administrators have a substantial influence on the quality of community life

(Starratt, 2004). Thus, the building of a PLC is inescapably intertwined with the role of the REC. Through an administrative or managerial role the RECs can play a key role in nurturing a climate that supports innovative professional activity. Chapman (2001, p. 56) argued that they are “architects of organisational arrangements, linking people, opportunities and resources”. Starratt (2004) affirmed “The authentic educational leader unceasingly cultivates an environment that promotes the work of authentic teaching and learning” (p. 81). In their role as leaders, RECs arguably should create and maintain a supportive environment for both staff and student learning that makes it possible for learning goals of the school to be achieved.

However, RECs as leaders of professional learning must know and enact the skills of leadership to present, nurture and celebrate professional learning in Catholic primary schools, and do so in ways that engage and enrich both individuals and the school as a learning community. Professional learning depends to a substantial degree on the REC’s skills as an agent of change. Boundaries between upper, middle and lower level managers, as has been traditionally perceived in primary schools, may need to be redrawn. Less static and more open ended leadership is required if the more proactive and creative aspects of managerial roles are to be achieved. A shared commitment to professional learning is needed as the domain of the principal and REC overlap and belong to the same continuum. Together they must work in complementary ways to create the conditions for school improvement (Harris, 2011).

Implications of leadership learning for Religious Educators

In order to reflect the importance and status of professional learning for RE, it has been argued that Catholic school leaders need to demonstrate educative leadership. Bezzina (2008) summarised that according to research this entails: “Leadership through collegiality, leadership based on evidence, leadership for professional learning, leadership for sustainability, leadership building culture and community, leadership for effective change, leadership through networking and leadership building capability” (p. 228). Consequently it can be claimed that successful religious leadership, with an educational focus, must stimulate learning for staff and students and create the organisational structures and conduits for learning to occur. The seriousness and complexity of this task cannot be overstated. The principal and REC must work collaboratively to establish teacher, student and school learning

which have a positive impact on school culture and create the conditions for school improvement in RE (Caldwell, 2004; Harris, 2011).

Concern about the knowledge, time, energy, and skills required in leading professional learning, coupled with questions of modelling, infrastructure and other supports needed to generate the climate, enthusiasm and commitment to professional learning may serve as serious impediments to the growth of religious educators. In order to better understand and seek to rectify this situation the following research question was pursued in this research.

Research Question 2.

According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen and challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?

The Religious Education Coordinator

Introduction

The REC has a key role in RE in Catholic primary schools. This section of the literature review illustrates how the role is understood differently by official stakeholders within different dioceses. A review and analysis of official documentation on the role of the REC in Australian Catholic primary schools provides an outline of the role through three frameworks: leadership, curriculum and staff professional learning.

The Role of the Australian REC according to Official Sources

RECs have been operating within Catholic schools in Australia since the early 1970's under a variety of names and structures, and the role has evolved since its inception (Engebretson, 2006; Fleming, 2001). The practice of the role has been guided by publications from CECs and CEOs. A review of these official publications indicated that many dioceses have developed statements that unambiguously value the leadership contributions of the REC. This contention is illustrated in the Table 2.5. which provides examples from different dioceses across the country.

Table 2.5.
Diocesan Leadership Expectations for the REC

Diocese	Statements by way of example of leadership expectations	Implication
The diocese of Canberra & Goulburn (2003)	a significant religious and educational leadership role in the school community	Position has a distinctive leadership responsibilities
The diocese of Wollongong (2005)	both religious and educational leadership	Position has dual responsibilities
The diocese of Ballarat (2003)	That the position is of paramount importance and should be given the status and recognition appropriate to its importance	In order to recognise the value of the position it must be designated with priority.

These statements signify that according to official sources the REC role is a position of leadership of paramount importance in the Catholic primary school. Further, it deserves status and recognition appropriate to its importance. There is also agreement that from an educational perspective that the REC is delegated a key responsibility from the principals, for teaching and learning in RE. However this contention must acknowledge the research of Neidhart and Lamb, (2011; 2013) which indicated that principals (both primary and secondary) claimed that it can never be totally delegated to anyone. This understanding is vital to this study for, while the responsibilities of the REC go beyond an educational focus, the degree to which RECs and other stakeholders understand, implement and evaluate the educational dimension of their role is crucial to this study.

Overview of REC role according to Official CEO Documentation

In order to provide an overview of the role and identify the specified leadership, educational and professional learning responsibilities according to official CEO documentation a comparative table, Table 2.6. is presented.

Table 2.6.
Overview of REC role according to CEO documentation

CEO	Title	Educational role	Inclusion to Executive	Leadership responsibility	Professional learning responsibility
<i>Adelaide</i>	<i>APRIM</i>	√	√	√	
<i>Armidale</i>	<i>REC</i>	√	√	√	√
<i>Brisbane</i>	<i>APRE</i>	√		√	
<i>Cairns</i>	<i>APRE</i>	√	√	√	√
<i>Canberra Goulburn</i>	<i>REC</i>		√	√	√
<i>Darwin</i>	<i>APRE/DP/ REC</i>	√	√	√	
<i>Hobart</i>	<i>APRE</i>	√		√	
<i>Melbourne</i>	<i>REC</i>	√		√	
<i>Parramatta</i>	<i>APRE</i>	√	√	√	√
<i>Sydney</i>	<i>REC</i>	√		√	√
<i>Townsville</i>	<i>REC</i>	√		√	√

This table illustrates variance in the title, operations and support designated to the REC. Ambiguity and complexity associated with this multifaceted role is reflected in the lack of consistency and agreement with regard to expectations, responsibilities and priorities of the role from diocese to diocese across Australia. These varying perspectives may be problematic and this analysis, although eight years later, concurs with Buchanan's (2005) study that there

is “no clear uniform perception about the role” (p. 6). There is also a lack of clarity as to the scope and extent of leadership and professional learning responsibilities needed in the role.

Implications of discrepancies in official documentation

As each Catholic diocese is autonomous in the management of its schools, a measure of diversity is necessary and inevitable as Catholic schools conform to the local challenges placed before them. Nonetheless, these varying stipulations have made it difficult to establish agreed expectations regarding the requirements and expectations of the different dimensions of the role. Notwithstanding, legitimate variations across different contexts, a commitment and priority for appropriate religious leadership in the areas of curriculum and professional learning is necessary in order to ensure the continuing credibility of the subject. This is especially important if, as has been argued in Chapter one, the subject is to be seen as commensurate with other key learning areas of a Catholic primary school.

Whilst there was general agreement about the educational dimension of the REC role, to support the proposition that the REC should guide and direct the practice of RE in the Catholic primary school, the lack of recognition of the leadership role with regard to professional learning of staff was of particular interest to this study. If the REC is to be involved in leadership and curriculum endeavours, it is necessary to question why the logical extension of this, responsibility for both student and staff learning has not yet occurred at least explicitly in official documentation. Perhaps the role of the REC as *leader* of professional learning in the primary Catholic context has not yet been optimised because no contemporary Australian research has studied it in depth.

Leadership Role of the REC

As has been identified earlier in this review, religious learning in Catholic primary schools is arguably dependent upon the exercise of effective leadership. The apparent variation in system guidelines and inconsistencies indicate that there needs to be more clarity about the specific leadership role of the REC to ensure that the educational aspect and the associated responsibilities are made explicit. The in-depth analysis of a variety of official documentation revealed there were few descriptors that related to how RECs as leaders might lead RE professional learning in schools. This paucity of documentation “fleshing out” the leadership dimensions of the role may exacerbate the effectiveness with which the REC can fulfil the

role. Further, if leadership responsibilities are not clearly articulated and defined this may be a source of tension in determining the most appropriate ways of evaluating the RECs performance. The challenge for each diocese is to make adequate provision for this leadership dimension and to specify what it may entail in practice.

This lack of clarity and agreement by major stakeholders is a significant area of concern and invites further scrutiny, as it is fundamental to any attempts by Catholic schools to create and define new and better understandings of the leadership role of the REC in light of the contemporary and challenging educational context. Chapter one of this thesis identified that Catholic schools now implement an educational approach in each diocese. This means that RE is seen as an authentic learning area in the curriculum and must be recognised and valued. Paradoxically official documentation in regard to how the REC's responsibilities may intentionally value and support the educational goals of RE, (whether by oversight or intent), appear less convincing. Whilst many dioceses have developed curriculum frameworks for RE that have matched frameworks used in the other learning areas, the educational responsibilities of the REC do not appear to match the educational responsibilities allocated to other curriculum leaders within a school, as evidenced by a comparison of RECs to Maths leaders in Catholic schools in Melbourne (Contemporary Teaching and Learning of Mathematics, [CTLM], ACU & CEOM, 2011).

In the analysis of different REC role descriptions, it must be recognised that some documentation was very detailed, for example the 2007 *Gold document* (CEOS, 2007). This corresponds with an earlier analysis of the various diocesan REC documents provided by Fleming (2002). The obvious benefit of having thorough and explicit documentation is that it clearly specifies the roles, responsibilities, employment and professional learning requirements of the REC. This in turn highlights and reflects the pivotal role an REC can play in *leading* and supporting the school's RE program. By making the skills and knowledge expected of RECs transparent and accessible, RECs are better placed to succeed in their leadership role (Dowling, 2011). How the written requirements align with the reality at a local level, however, is another issue.

Sometimes within official CEO documentation there were broad and vague statements which made it difficult to understand what the criteria entailed in practice. Further, there was little practical guidance as to how this religious leadership might happen. This difficulty is

exemplified by statements like “the provision of in-service opportunities for RE staff” (CEOS, 2007, p. 6). Such ambiguity does not clarify the extent of the role of the REC, whether they are to lead, organise or simply arrange outside providers to conduct professional learning. Sometimes even when documentation did make a clear case for the REC to have a particular role and responsibility in the area of staff learning, it was lacking in specific statements to help achieve this. There was also a lack of clarity as to the scope and extent of leadership needed in this role.

Calls for lucidity in regard to this issue are not new. As far back as 1999, Bezzina and Wilson recommended a greater commitment to religious leadership. They generated a number of models of good practice including: a) status quo; b) raising the status of the role; c) raising the status of the role and sharing some responsibilities; a second Assistant principal as well as REC; d) shared religious leadership; and e) thinking outside the square (p. 14). Since then, ongoing discussion and research in this area (Buchanan, 2010; Crotty, 2006, Dowling, 2011; Fleming, 2005) have yet to determine how to best achieve REC leadership success. The need for a strong sense of direction in which there are clearly identifiable leadership responsibilities has been recognised by scholars yet; it appears that is not always supported in official documents.

Evolving expectations

Historically the REC position has been labelled as a co-ordinator’s role, as distinct from a leader’s role. A co-ordinator brings together, makes links and establishes routines and common practices. In contrast a leader offers expertise and directs and guides the development of the subject to raise standards. The concept of religious leadership, therefore, offers a greater degree of responsibility, direction and accountability than the notion of coordination. A distinctive focus on the leadership dimension of the role has occurred in recent years.

Buchanan (2013, p. 122) explained “The reclassification of the leader in religious education to a senior leadership position sought to give public recognition to the importance of the role”. Table 2.7. illustrates the development of the REC’s role and how it has been elevated to a more senior position in terms of title, status, responsibility and remuneration in three Australian archdioceses.

Table 2.7.
Upgrading of the role of the REC according to CEO documentation

Location	Time	Title	Responsibility	Time	Title/ position	Elevated Responsibility
Melbourne	1984	Coordinator	Development, coordination and delivery of the RE curriculum	2005-11	REC-equivalent to DP	A central leadership role with broad responsibilities for the learning programs and the life of faith in the school
Sydney	1983	Coordinator	Curriculum development and planning	2007	REC	Leadership in ensuring quality teaching and learning in RE
Adelaide	2004	Coordinator	involved in leadership structures	2009	AP Religious Identity and Mission-Masters Degree	Works as part of leadership team and actively shapes the religious identity

Some Catholic schools have been challenged to review the arrangements made to designate positions of religious leadership. As a result, the new title “Assistant Principal” is now used by some of the various Catholic Education Offices (CEOA, CEOB, CEOC, and CEOD) and the financial remuneration equivalent to a deputy principal position has given recognition to the increased professional status of the role. Further, the documents specify that leadership is required as opposed to simply coordination. Despite these positive leadership developments, observations and anecdotal evidence from practising RECs suggests that greater promotion about the importance of the role is still required to raise the leadership status. Some current serving RECs report a disjunction between their actual work and what others perceive their work to be. This suggests that ambiguities about leadership that have evolved from the CEO documentation remain (Crotty, 2002) and need further and urgent attention.

Transition to Support RECs to meet New Expectations.

In order to meet the expectations of the aforementioned documentation and to assist the REC to effectively function in the role, various CEOs across Australia have made a commitment to raising the educational qualifications of the RECs through a broad range of initiatives. Buchanan (2013, p. 119) recognised that “These initiatives are intended to convey the importance of religious education in a Catholic school”. A rich tradition of professional associations for RECs stretching back some thirty years includes the provision of collegial support, guidance and resources. Like other educational leaders discussed earlier in this review, RECs require vision, support, management skills, and an understanding of contemporary leadership, curriculum and pedagogy to succeed in their leadership role. In order to support RECs to acquire the necessary knowledge skills and experience to succeed in their leadership role, different dioceses have placed a high value on formal qualifications for the REC. This is evidenced in different dioceses (CEOB, formerly CEOM) which moved beyond broad statements, and for the first time spelt out a criteria for a substantive appointment with inclusion in the leadership team and remuneration equivalent to a Deputy principal. Unlike preceding documents, it aimed to ensure that RECs were prepared and equipped to become competent members of school leadership teams and rewarded appropriately. To be eligible for such senior positions, RECs need to be experienced and appropriately qualified. CEO incentives (study support, funding) assisted schools to make these criteria reality.

For those desirous of moving into this upgraded leadership position, in partnership with the CEO, the ACU tailored a Master of Religious Education degree to acquire professional expertise in theology, religious and leadership education. This course aimed to extend knowledge and expertise to inform and enrich the leadership component of the REC role. Sponsorship for further studies at University level meant that aspiring RECs or current RECs can avail themselves of this opportunity to develop their leadership skills in the area of RE (Buchanan, 2013). Commitment to academic study at a system level has reinforced the belief that leading a school’s RE program requires a high level of leadership, administrative and management skills. The REC must be adequately qualified and capable to best perform in his or her role. This view has been validated by Crotty (2002, p. 191) who claimed further study “resulted in the combined influence of curriculum leaders and informed religious educators on religious education in the classroom, and in education generally”. Crotty also affirmed that

further study for the REC has “increasingly been prized for its beneficial consequences” (p. 182).

Implications of official documentation for this thesis

The diverse range of perspectives on the role of the REC in Australia has given prominence to the place of leadership and curriculum development. A development in understanding the demands and complexity of the leadership responsibilities of the role is evident with a more sophisticated, nuanced form of religious leadership in Catholic schools. As CEOs have developed more structured and formal procedures for the selection and appointment of RECs, the support offered to enhance their leadership role has also increased. However, whilst the leadership focus has been elevated in some instances, arguably the long term success of accompanying CEO support initiatives to enhance the leadership growth of RECs has yet to be measured. Further, there was disparity in relation to the designated responsibility of the REC for staff professional learning. This suggests that it is timely to explore this anomaly further and to focus on the responsibilities of the REC as a leader of professional learning.

Literature and Research on the Role of REC in the Australian Context.

Introduction

Whilst it has been established that system guidelines, and directives inform and influence the priority given to various aspects of the REC’s responsibility, in this section an examination of the REC role in secondary literature and research is provided, again in three key distinct but interrelated, dimensions- REC as leader, REC as leader of curriculum and REC as leader of staff professional learning. This aligns with the work of Johnson (1989, p. 44) who designated six areas of responsibility for the REC, of which three areas correlate to this study, namely: a) the REC as leader of the RE team; b) the REC as designer of the RE curriculum; c) the REC as convenor of staff development.

REC as Leader

Literature and empirical studies confirmed the changing perceptions around the leadership role of the REC. The increased interest in the role of the REC as leader matches the ongoing scholarly discussion in wider educational circles as to how to best achieve educational leadership success. Sharkey (2006) acknowledged this interest from a religious perspective

and aptly noted: “There are many facets to religious leadership and a multitude of theories that might be employed in an analysis of it” (p. 80).

As far back as 1981, Stuart suggested that the role of the REC would become more appealing with a clear and positive status. Exploring the role of primary RECs, Sierakowski (1991) repeated the need to increase respect for the role and stated it required both status and resources to support it. However it has been argued that little focus has been given to the leadership role of the REC (Crotty, 2003). Though some policy documents designate the role as senior leadership, a previous study in the diocese of Parramatta by Blahut and Bezzina (1998) revealed that when RECs were asked to comment on the features of their role, none of the participants commented on the leadership dimension of their role. Given that this study is over ten years old, it is necessary to use an empirical study to consider if any progress has occurred.

Fleming’s (2002) study of 23 RECs from Catholic secondary schools in Melbourne argued that the leadership role was of importance and should be acknowledged, not a “token membership” (2002, p. 202). In the same year, Crotty’s research recognised that the position operates between the paradigms of leadership and management. This important nexus is explored in more detail later in this chapter. Using a limited sample, Crotty highlighted tensions about how religious leadership is realised in practice, noting inconsistency in leadership requirements. These findings indicated that leadership problems were compounded as the leadership function is “inadequately served by its structural location” (p. 185). Given this finding, Crotty consequently endorsed the need to reconsider the leadership role of the REC. She claimed the position was “too tunnelled and could be enhanced by movement to a more flattened practice of religious leadership” (p. 207). This finding correlates with *Distributed Leadership Studies* (DLS) (Dinham, 2008; Spillane, 2009) which promoted a distributed leadership model where leadership is spread across the school. The concept of distributed leadership is considered essential to discussion about leadership in educational settings. This view implies that leadership is an empowering process, enabling others within an organisation to exercise leadership (Beatty, 2008; Dimmock, 2003; Harris, 2011).

³Support for the primary REC and their capacity to engage with and enact leadership for learning in the primary context is less well understood but critical to the promotion of quality RE. For this reason the leadership role of the REC in the Melbourne Archdiocese was investigated in more detail in 2005 in a joint research pilot project undertaken by the CEOM, in conjunction with the Centre of Creative and Authentic Leadership, ACU. This two year pilot project tracked 13 RECs who had attained their Masters of RE and were elevated to the position of Assistant principal with matching salary conditions, and inclusion in the leadership team. *The Primary Religious Education Coordinators' Pilot Project* (PRECPP) drew upon surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews to map the leadership dimensions of 13 eligible RECs. The findings and recommendations focused on the RECs in their primary school setting and sought to understand how they constructed meaning about their leadership role in Catholic schools (Neidhart & Carlin, 2007). The final report (2007) illustrated that leadership team responsibilities were diverse and included: a) attending and participating in team meetings; b) ensuring the priority of the Catholic schools ethos; c) ensuring RE time is protected; d) preparation of, and participation in selection interviews, e) meetings with the Principal and parish priest (p. 21). This summary does not indicate the extent of leadership displayed by participating RECs unless there was awareness of their context before the study began, however it does provide recent and relevant insights into leadership responsibilities of Melbourne primary RECs. By the second year, findings indicated that almost eighty percent of participating RECs were exercising their responsibilities as members of school leadership teams. Further, some RECs were designated increasing responsibility in whole school leadership (2007). Whilst the success in growth of leadership of the 13 RECs involved is admirable, it is also important to broaden support for the continuation and expansion of the leadership role for all in the role of REC. Further it is necessary to consider the voice of current practitioners and stakeholders to identify if leadership growth is continuing, stagnating or declining in Catholic primary schools.

³ Sections of this have been published in

Dowling, E. (2011). Religious leaders lead... or do they? An examination of the leadership role of the REC in Australian catholic schools *Journal of Religious Education*, 51(4), 22-30.

Though the role of the REC has been advocated as one of religious leadership within the school (Crotty, 2006; D’Orsa, 1998; Dowling, 2012), the PRECPP report (2007) demonstrated that this is not necessarily the case in practice. Whilst the 13 RECs were elevated to more senior leadership positions, which included membership of school leadership teams, some respondents commented that there had been little or no change to the REC role (p. vii). In contrast, only one school indicated that the policy was “a matter of catching up with, and reflecting, good practice” (p. vii). This lack of leadership growth over the two year period warrants further investigation. This slow transition suggested that written aspirations do not transfer easily or automatically into action. Further, it appears change in leadership practice will not occur quickly or spontaneously. Having positional leadership does not mean one has fully developed leadership capabilities. Whilst this research was particular to the Melbourne Archdiocese, the implications of the research for other dioceses are evident. It seems the existence of constraining factors beyond the control of RECs, may mean that the actual leadership work of RECs may differ from their desired roles. This lack of leadership growth over the two year period warrants further investigation.

Leadership or Management

Different religious scholars in the Australian context (Engebretson, 1998; Fleming, 2001) have recognised the leadership and management aspects of the role of the REC. Distinctions made between leadership and management by these writers, while helpful in some respects, do not adequately reflect the complex nature of educational leadership and management in the current climate. Leadership and management are complementary, yet it is now well recognised that leadership goals cannot be achieved without sound management skills.⁴ D’Orsa (1998) affirmed that the REC needed “sound management techniques which characterise good leadership” (p. 34). In contrast, McCarthy (2004) probing the nexus between leadership and management, suggested “Administration, executive and management are... not necessarily connected with leaders and leadership” (p. 28).

⁴ Parts of this section appear in

Dowling, E. (2012). An investment in our future: reimagining professional learning for religious educators. *Religious Education Journal of Australia* 28(1), 23-29.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned perceptions of the managerial role, a paradigm shift has occurred and disquiet about excessive managerialism has led to the appeal for transformation of managers and administrators into leaders. There are now researchers who contend that RECs need to be leaders who are not primarily administrators or managers (Dowling, 2011; Healy, 2011). They argue that RECs must be more intentional about their leadership of learning. The “leadership” aspect of the role is expected at a deeper level, requiring more than just experience and competence in a series of administrative or management skills. Whilst leadership and management are both necessary, leadership has priority over management. Contemporary studies and literature purport that the responsibilities of the REC therefore go beyond claims of simply management of the RE program and call for a more expansive understanding of leadership. This contention echoes the CECV *Leadership in Catholic School Development Framework and Standards of Practice* (LSF, 2005) which promoted a strong focus on educational leadership within a Catholic school as distinct from leadership for management.

This nexus is complicated by the fact that the leadership role of the REC may also be perceived as middle leadership/management as the role is a strategic one (Bennet et al., 2007) and RECs use their position to increase organisational effectiveness. Traditionally, managers occupy the middle ground in organisations, however, the roles that managers play and the expectations that others have of them are evolving (Hobby, 2012; Toop, 2013). The capacity of middle managers to lead towards school improvement is hindered by limitations cited by Brown, Boyle, and Boyle, (2002) including, time, role ambiguity, exclusion from decision making and lack of communication. These inhibiting factors identified in UK secondary schools must likewise be overcome in Australian Catholic primary schools if a commitment to enact and strengthen the leadership role of the REC in educational endeavours is to be achieved.

Whilst leadership should take priority over management or simple coordination, RE scholars have acknowledged that administration and organisational skills are also indispensable dimensions of leadership (Rymarz, 1997; D’Orsa, 1988). It was argued that without these skills the REC can limit their ability to fulfil their educational leadership potential.

Implications of Literature and Research on the REC as Leader in the Australian context

What has become increasingly clear in both empirical studies and literature is that there is a need to *deliberately* foster and support the leadership growth of RECs. The most recent and relevant study for this review, the PRECPP (2007) final recommendations related directly to the leadership responsibilities of the REC and directed that to facilitate the transition of the REC to whole school leaders, the new leadership role be clearly defined, that there be common understandings of the key responsibilities of the role and that principals utilize opportunities to “grow” additional leadership capacity in their schools (pp. 46-47). The research demonstrated that the leadership dimension of the role is inextricably linked to factors within the school as the workplace of the teacher and is subject to pressure and support from outside the system. This research paid increased attention to the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead. Whilst other studies have identified factors which support RECs in their leadership role, little knowledge is available that concerns the nature of school based professional learning in the primary RE context, and how this is facilitated by RECs as leaders. This study provides an opportunity to determine if recent research recommendations have been enacted. Further it provides an opportunity to speak to people who influence and enact the role of the REC and to provide “voice” to their specific situations in the Catholic primary context.

Supports for RECs as Leaders

A variety of past studies in the Australian context indicated that a principal has a vital role to play in supporting the REC (Buchanan, 2010; Crotty, 2002; 2005; Healy, 2011). Studies as far back as Woodhouse’s study (1983) endorsed that the supporting role of the principal must be “explicit and active” in order for the REC to function effectively and for RE to be given top priority (p. 59). In Buchanan’s (2007) thesis REC (A) claimed support from school leadership “was very positive.... and helped significantly” (p. 243) and assisted in the management of curriculum change. The PRECPP (2007) report also provided strong evidence that leadership capacity building for RECs can be enhanced by working collaboratively with a principal.

Some RE research has concluded that organisational arrangements are required to support the REC in their leadership role. However little knowledge is available that concerns the nature and extent of that concern in relation to the REC leading professional learning in

the primary context. The need for suitable status and the difference between the theoretical status in documentation and the real status, financial arrangements, time and school based professional development was proposed by Brandon (1984). More recent research has indicated that these tensions still exist. Different Australian research revealed that the REC is supported by a range of structures and services including time release, professional learning and influences by the principal and leadership teams' intent (Crotty, 2003; Fleming 2002). Fleming termed this support "symbolic" (p. 52). Both research and literature reinforced that RECs must be supported in a professional manner with the conditions that are necessary to enable the person to be most effective in the leadership role.

Implications of Literature and Research on the support for the REC as Leader in the Australian Context

Whilst different studies identified potential for, and anomalies in the leadership role of the REC, it is clear that capacity building for the REC in RE has been raised as a serious issue by various scholars of RE (Dowling, 2012; Engebretson & Grajczonek, 2012). This research provides a timely opportunity to consider whether the present leadership structure and organisation of some primary Catholic schools indicates any progress in this area. The contemporary challenge remains to identify and to create the conditions for effective leadership so that RE is *led* by a recognised subject leader who makes best use of their *leadership* to ensure RE is acknowledged by virtually all learners and key stakeholders as being a priority in the life of the school. This study may contribute to knowledge in the field associated with leadership of professional learning in the primary RE context.

REC as Leader of Curriculum

Leadership in the area of RE curriculum is pivotal. Numerous religious scholars in the Australian context concur that the RE curriculum and teaching is a particular concern of the REC (Buchanan, 2007; Crotty, 2002; Fleming, 2002). Engebretson (2006, p. 148) declared that RECs be "informed and skilled teachers, masters of the content of religion" and she added the necessary caveat that they also are "able to lead others by example in this". These requirements are essential for an REC as leader of professional learning as they are an immediate source of professional learning for some RE teachers. Mc Court (1981) identified components of the REC role which included the aspect of "class work programs and staff development". Woodhouse's (1983) post graduate study indicated an ongoing concern

apparent in other empirical studies regarding the difficulty of the curriculum role the REC must undertake. Johnson (1989) incidentally drew attention to the curriculum role when his study noted the time consuming nature of administration tasks, (for example the circulation of resources).

To be effective as an educational leader of curriculum, RECs need qualifications, confidence and competence in the religious curriculum domain. Engebretson (1998, p. 25) affirmed: “The professional standards we set for appointing people to the role say a great deal about our understanding of RE as a curriculum area which requires highly skilled leadership, and the priority we give it within the curriculum”. Expectations regarding post graduate tertiary qualifications for primary RECs have had an impact differently on RECs (Bezzina & Wilson, 1999). Chapter one of this thesis has already identified this conviction in numerous Church documents, however scholars in both a primary and secondary research context (Buchanan, 2010; Healy, 2011) noted that some RECs had little experience or qualifications. Of further significance to this study was the claim by D’Orsa, (1998), that some RECs resented being asked to reach a high level of educational competence. Perhaps this explains the broad spectrum of knowledge and qualifications of RECs (Rymarz, 2012). Diversity in the level of study, expertise and experience are key variables that will have an impact on the effectiveness of the REC as leader of the religious curriculum. In order to be successful as leaders of curriculum demands the leader must have “sufficient knowledge in the educational field in which the leader is leading” (D’Orsa, 1998, p. 34).

The broad scope of curriculum, leadership undertaken by the primary RECs was evidenced in the PRECPP project (2007) which speaks of RE curriculum leadership as “working with teachers, leading the planning and evaluation of RE units, making provision for related curriculum planning and resourcing” (p. 21). Research in RE in the Australian context demonstrated that credibility, competence and confidence were key variables needed for success in this area. Crotty (2005) found that the REC position had a positive impact when the REC was “credible as a classroom teacher and competent as a curriculum coordinator” (p. 52). In contrast Buchanan’s (2005) study in the secondary context revealed that some RECs were not as confident in their ability to exercise curriculum leadership as they were in exercising ministerial leadership. More alarmingly his (2005) study conceded that some RECs impeded the process of curriculum change: “Inexperience in curriculum leadership may have posed challenges for RECs” (p. 232). An RECs lack of subject expertise

may give rise to a perceived lack of credibility in their role. Limited experience and knowledge about the use of textbooks in RE, on the part of RECs were named as factors that impeded curriculum change. The REC as leader of curriculum is significant to the success of curriculum initiatives yet conversely Buchanan's study cautioned a dependency model of REC curriculum leadership which can limit shared learning. Whilst the REC's specific role and impact in the implementation and management of curriculum change at both a secondary and primary level has been considered at this stage, there appears no corresponding research about the RECs role in leading and supporting the ongoing, learning needs of the RE teacher within the primary RE curriculum. Whilst curriculum change requires deliberate leadership efforts, this study provides an opportunity to consider the role of the REC in the day to day professional learning needs of teachers without contending with the magnitude of issues associated with implementing major curriculum change.

It has been argued that the REC is essential in encouraging and sustaining high quality learning in this area (Dowling, 2012; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013). Yet within this educational dimension of the role it appears that scholars demand that RECs are not simply leaders of RE curriculum but are also "integrated educational leaders" (D'Orsa 1998, p.36). This expansive view was echoed by Fleming (2001) who claimed "they are leaders within the mainstream educational endeavours of the schools rather than just 'holy people'" (p. 104). This implies proficiency in the RE curriculum as well as contemporary educational theory and practice. Literature and practice differ in this regard. Crotty's (2003) study generated through focus groups with six RECs and principals in the Archdiocese of Sydney highlighted that the REC is seen almost singly as the focus of all religious activity. This indicated that Fleming's sentiments are difficult to attain in practice. Further, shifting the onus for the catholicity of the Catholic school to the REC may curtail or limit curriculum development.

Recent literature and research has shown that a long standing tension exists between the ecclesial (liturgy, prayer, sacraments, formation activities) and educational dimensions of the REC role (Buchanan, 2005; 2010; Engebretson; 1998; Fleming, 2001). There is a danger in overstating one aspect of the role. The concern of RECs in relation to their neglect of the RE curriculum was identified by Blahut and Bezzina (1998) many years ago. The difficulty of balancing the different responsibilities of the REC role according to Blahut and Bezzina (1998) was that whilst the development, implementation and evaluation of the RE curriculum should be a primary concern, in reality more time and energy is invested in meeting other

dimensions of the role. An emphasis on other aspects of the RECs' role may be detrimental to the primary work of RECs in the area of RE curriculum.

The bi-dimensional nature of the role was acknowledged in Fleming's (2002) research conducted with secondary RECs. RECs interviewed (D & E) confirmed the dual dimensions of the role - curriculum leadership and faith development leadership. Respondent E's feedback suggested that the faith development prevailed: "the other stuff takes up your time because it's the stuff that's got to be done" (p. 197). A consequence of this imbalance is that the curriculum is neglected. The discrepancy between the theory and practice of coordinating both RE and co-ordinating faith seems a recurring tension. Crotty's (2005) research again highlighted the lack of clarity about the priority RECs should give to the different dimensions of their role. She identified areas of ambiguity in the REC position, including that RECs give far greater weight to the Church ministry aspects of their role even when the classroom RE is in urgent need of leadership. Buchanan's (2005; 2010) research also in the secondary context exposed "a broader role for the REC as a curriculum leader" (p. 203) yet confirmed that RECs can operate from the stance that the position is more a religious position than an educational one. In a more recent study conducted in the Tasmanian context Healy's (2011) research indicated that the educational/ministerial ambiguity of the REC role has yet to be resolved. Engebretson (2006) contended that "Proper attention may be given to all aspects of the role" (p. 149), however mounting research has demonstrated that this goal remains an issue which may constrain the educational focus of the REC.

Implications of Literature and Research on REC as leader of curriculum

Tensions between the dual responsibilities of the role of the REC (ecclesial and educational) continue to challenge RECs in both the priority and practice they give to each dimension. A single minded focus on the achievement of any one dimension to the detriment of the other is difficult to justify. However, the literature indicates that achieving a balance is difficult in practice.

REC as leader of staff professional learning

Despite an extensive search, few secondary sources specific and detailed about the role of the REC as leader of professional learning were available. Hyde (2006) declared "it is the task of the REC... to play a key role in planning these events" (p. 37). Healy (2006) extended this

thinking and suggested they become “a prime mover in reflective professional practice in RE and a strategic facilitator of adult religious professional development” (p. 71). Different RE scholars, (Malone & Ryan, 2001; Nolen, 2008) recognised that the REC can directly support teachers in their classroom work through curriculum leadership, holding staff to account and mentoring staff in planning, teaching, assessing and evaluation of religion lessons. Rymarz (1998) reiterated that RECs can provide opportunities for staff professional learning, while Buchanan’s (2005) study reported that secondary RECs claimed professional learning experiences have assisted staff to acquire key curriculum competencies. Bezzina (1996) also maintained that “The best place for professional development is with one’s colleagues in one’s own school” (p. 17). Since then there is much agreement that RE staff professional learning should be context based (Healy, 2003; 2011; Buchanan, 2005; 2010).

The dual role of the REC as leadership of curriculum and leadership of staff learning was described by Engebretson (1997) as both “a skilled curriculum developer, an educator of other teachers” (p. 169). According to Engebretson, RECs as leaders need an ability to “inspire other teachers to professional standards and ensure that the area of human learning called RE is taught well” (p. 172). Whilst it may be argued that the REC has a particular responsibility for staff professional learning, the extent of this responsibility remains unclear. The scope ranges from the views of scholars like Johnson (1998), who maintained RECs should simply convene staff development, to the more sophisticated view of contemporary scholarship of Crotty (2002), who insisted the **leadership** (emphasis added) of the REC pertains to education of teachers.

Exacerbating the varying expectations of the extent of the role of a REC as a leader of professional learning, Buchanan’s, (2005, p. 9) study indicated some RECs lack “confidence in their ability to lead members of their faculty”. The challenges faced by RECs as facilitators of learning have also been highlighted by Healy (2006). Good RECs, according to Rymarz (1998), require skilful professional knowledge however, if RECs are to lead professional learning of staff, then a lack of knowledge, skill experience and confidence can be serious impediments to their role as leader of staff professional learning.

Leadership for professional learning as a driver of change and development is affirmed by various scholars in the wider educational setting, although English, (2007) suggested there has been little research conducted about professional learning and the

religious educator. Brandon's (1984) study of the implementation of the Melbourne *Guidelines* concluded that the quality of leadership by the REC was a key determinant of the effective implementation of the Guidelines. This resonates with Buchanan (2005) whose findings indicated that "professional development opportunities were organised by RECs and school based professional learning opportunities occurred in structured Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) and through learning presentations (p. 192). RECs considered themselves as "able to be responsible for facilitating and leading professional experiences of RE teachers" (p. 240). Buchanan's study also claimed that the RECs gained professional satisfaction from facilitating these (p. 221). When asked to comment on professional learning, participants in the PRECPP (2007) claimed a variety of roles which included: "working to organise and monitor professional development for staff; attending zone RE network meetings and reporting back to the leadership and staff" (p. 21). A distinct leadership dimension is lacking in these responses. The PRECPP final report noted that "for RECs to work with teams of teachers is an effective strategy. It affords opportunity for professional learning" (2007, p. 25). This finding affirmed the work of numerous educational scholars such as Fullan, (2004) whose studies claimed that effective professional learning community is salient to building the capacity of a school.

Implications of Literature and Research on the REC as Leader of Staff Professional Learning in the Australian context

The paucity of research about the nature and extent of professional learning in RE in the Catholic primary context confirmed the need to pay increased attention to the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead learning. There appears scant literature or research to support the REC in their work of leading and supporting staff and student learning in primary RE. The lingering ambiguity about the dimensions of the role, as well as the competing responsibilities of the role, suggest that more information is needed to explore how REC leaders support the professional learning of RE classroom teachers, whilst operating within the aforementioned tensions.

Summary and implications of the role of the REC

Support for RECs in their responsibility for professional learning is in part dependent on the vision and support of the CEO at a systems level, and at the local level by the principal. However RECs operate within the intersection of community, staff, clergy, employing

authorities and students and consequently experience the dynamics of competing challenges, aspirations and understandings held by these key stakeholders. Official documentation, secondary literature and empirical studies confirmed that leading teaching and learning is at the core of the role of the REC. Yet this leadership role is integrated within an array of responsibilities. RECs are leaders who are responsible for student learning yet, the neglect or lack of credence given to the responsibility of the REC in leading professional learning is compounded by the uncertainty and tension which continues between the educational and ministerial (ecclesial, faith) dimensions of the role. A key concern is the leadership capacity credibility and responsibility of the REC in leading staff professional learning. The paucity of literature and research into the role of the REC to lead professional learning in the primary context has confirmed a lacuna in this field.

Research Question 3.

Anomalies in official documentation, as well as secondary sources and empirical studies about the perception and value of the role of the REC in the professional learning of teachers have been identified. They lead to the following question which was explored in this research.

How do key stakeholders (CEOs, principals, RECs and RE teachers) perceive and value the responsibilities and leadership role of the REC in professional learning?

Conclusion to the Chapter

The purpose of this chapter was to present a critical synthesis of the literature that underpins the research problem that is investigated in this thesis. This chapter has sought to portray the complexity of leading professional learning of religious educators, cognizant of the factors that shape effective professional learning, leadership of learning and RECs in the primary school RE context. It recognized that RE staff learning is critical to school improvement and student learning. RECs as leaders of learning need to develop a deep understanding of how to support teachers and *lead* (as opposed to manage) the RE curriculum in ways that promote continuous learning. Supportive educational leadership for ongoing professional learning is therefore indispensable to the improvement of RE with a view to greater staff growth, school wide growth and ultimately improved student achievement in RE. It is important to pay respect to and be in knowledge of current literature and research about this issue. However three areas to facilitate further exploration have been established in this review and are encapsulated in the research questions.

- 1 A consideration of optimum models/approaches to professional learning for Catholic primary religious educators
- 2 An examination of factors which strengthen and challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning
- 3 An understanding of how key stakeholders perceive and value the responsibilities and leadership role of the REC in professional learning

In the following chapter, the research design that was used to gather data in relation to the research questions is presented, explained and justified.

CHAPTER THREE: THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction to the Chapter

The previous chapter provided a review and synthesis of the literature and research pertinent to this study, highlighting the complexity of the leadership role of the REC in respect to professional learning for RE teachers, and providing a context for the research questions. This chapter explains and justifies the design of the empirical component of the study, providing a description of and a rationale for each of the theoretical choices and demonstrating that the purpose of the research and the research questions directly link to the methodology and methods employed in this study. The chapter is presented in eight major sections, presenting in turn an overview of the research design, epistemological foundations, theoretical perspective, research methodology, data gathering strategies, (method) how the research was conducted, verifications of the study and ethical issues. The chapter concludes with a final overview of the research design.

Design of the Research

The research questions that focused the research design were:

- According to key stakeholders what models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools?
- According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen and challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?
- According to key stakeholders how do they perceive and value the leadership and responsibilities of the REC in professional learning?

Initial overview of the Theoretical Framework

Research takes place within a theoretical framework which provides a philosophical foundation that justifies and gives direction and structure to the research design (Gough, 2002). This theoretical framework explains the set of beliefs that the researcher brings to the research (Creswell, 2013). This study was within the qualitative domain, as the purpose of this research was to perceive meanings which people have constructed from events and

experiences in the REC role. Hence the epistemological framework of constructionism was adopted (Crotty 2003).

Constructionism as an epistemological lens provided understanding of reality for the participants' perspectives at a particular time and in a particular context. It explored people's beliefs, feelings and interpretations and how this knowledge was used to make sense of the work context (Neuman, 2006). This epistemology contends that people actively seek to construct an understanding of their world, and that social interactions helped shape their concept of reality (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013). As this research explored the experiences and perceptions of the REC as leader of professional learning a constructionist approach was appropriate. RECs as leaders are steeped in the reality of their own experiences, situations, day to day functioning and their meaning making. These experiences grow out of interactions with a wide array of individuals. RECs interact with the principal, staff and potentially CEO personnel as they seek to lead professional learning in RE and these interactions help shape professional learning. In seeking to understand the leadership role of the REC in professional learning, attention was devoted to the lived experience of those in the role. A strength of constructionism was the "close collaboration between the researcher and the participant enabling the participants to tell their stories" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 2).

Consistent with this epistemology, an interpretivist design was employed as the theoretical perspective. Interpretive research enabled an in-depth understanding of the social world from the RECs' perspectives. In particular the interpretivist lens of symbolic interactionism was appropriate in generating an understanding of the leadership of professional learning in RE in Catholic primary schools. Symbolic interactionism further supported this study through the exploration of beliefs, values and attitudes influencing RECs to act in a particular manner (Bassey, 1999).

Grounded theory, hereafter termed GT, was the research methodology used to orchestrate the use of data gathering strategies. This methodology enabled the researcher to generate theory that was 'grounded' in the experiences of the participants, by surveys, focus groups and interviews. The study was enriched by data that focused on people's lived experience and examined the meaning people placed on the events, processes and structure in their lives.

Table 3.1. *Overview of the research design* illustrates why this particular qualitative research was undertaken. Later in the chapter each element is discussed in more detail.

Table 3.1.
Overview of the Research Design.

Epistemology	Constructionism. Human beings construct their perceptions of the world, no one perception is “right” or more “real” than another. These realities must be seen as a whole (Glesne, 2011).
Theoretical perspective	Interpretivism. Social reality is not independent of the social meaning given to it by those in the setting. Symbolic interactionism is a form of interpretivism which focuses on how individuals ascribe meaning to experience.
Research Methodology	Grounded Theory (GT) an inductive methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss used to generate theory through the systematic and simultaneous process of data collection and analysis. Categories emerge which are ‘grounded’ in the experiences and perceptions of the research subjects and the main issues of the participants can be discovered.
Research methods	
Participants	Purposeful selection of key stakeholders with an interest in the quality of RE in the Catholic primary school. Participants included RE classroom teachers, RECs, principals and CEO representatives.
Data collection strategies	Online Survey, Focus groups, Unstructured interviews
Analysis of data	Constant comparison of categories of data according to the principles of Grounded Theory
Verifications	Trustworthiness

Epistemological Foundations

Researchers have multiple lenses and frameworks from which to view educational problems (Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). “From the Greek language, *episteme* meaning knowledge and *logos* meaning theory, epistemologies deal with questions about truth and what do we accept as truth ?” (Grbich, 2007, p. 3). Whilst various scholars employ slightly different approaches to mapping the complex territory of research, all researchers produce knowledge within a

particular epistemology (Gough, 2002). The subjectivist ontological assumptions underpinning this research placed the study within a qualitative paradigm. A qualitative study, described as “an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 5) is often used interchangeably with other terms like *ethnography*, *naturalistic inquiry*, *interpretive research*, *field study* and *inductive research*.

Not many years ago (1981-1982) *quantitative* and *qualitative* were presented as an incompatible dichotomy with all research from the outset divided into one or the other (Lincoln, 2009; O'Toole & Beckett, 2010). Much has been written about “political and paradigm disputes” in educational research (Yates, 2004). Yet given the justified popularity of qualitative approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), Creswell (2009) noted that: “Quantitative and qualitative research approaches are no longer seen as two completely separate different approaches, but as forms of research that lie along a continuum” (p. vi).

The complexity, flexibility and controversy of its many genres requires that qualitative research is defined in each context in which it is used. In this study it is defined as “an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 3). Through qualitative inquiry, the researcher embraced the complexity of multiple realities (Ary et al., 2010) and the inquiry process of understanding attempted to make sense of the phenomena of the leadership of professional learning in RE, in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Parsons and Brown (2002) argued that “qualitative research rests on a phenomenological foundation (Mason & Bramble, 1997) and has a strong focus on deriving meaning of a phenomenon through understanding the context in which it occurs” (p. 49). Consequently this study viewed the phenomenon under study as part of a whole, affected by, and in turn affecting, the environment in which the phenomenon occurs.

The attempts to view the RECs' leadership of professional learning experience holistically, exploring many aspects including the unique context within which the experience occurs, were typically context sensitive. It may be described as “the art of pursuing unique understandings in the unique circumstances of practice (Gough, 2002, p. 3). Therefore it was pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in the lived experience of the participants' reality. That is, this qualitative research “implies a direct concern with the experience as it is ‘lived’ or

‘felt’ or ‘undergone’ (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 7). In attempting to understand the leadership role of the REC in regard to professional learning there was a concern to gain an *emic* (Kottak, 2006) or insider’s perspective.

A qualitative approach was selected because the human and social basis of the study ensured it would be an appropriate and effective means of exploring the research questions. The complex facets of the reality of leadership of professional learning, combined with the need for an inductive methodology from which an effective theory of effective professional learning leadership practice might be developed, underpinned the decision to utilise qualitative research.

A constructionist theory of knowledge fits naturally in qualitative research. Constructionism emphasizes that meaning or reality is not constructed by individuals at the instance of each phenomenon, but rather it is socially constructed (Barkway, 2001). It espouses that there is no objective truth awaiting discovery, that meaning is not discovered but constructed, therefore truth (meaning) comes into existence in and out of our engagement with our world realities (Crotty, 2003). Researchers employing a constructionist epistemology make sense of meanings others have about the world through observation and conversation (Creswell, 2009). The epistemologies of constructivists are interactive where knowledge and findings are co-created (Mertens, 2005).

Theoretical Perspective

Interpretivism

Interpretivist researchers maintain that reality is not singular and seek to “observe measure and understand social reality” (Neuman, 2006, p. 65). A central endeavour of this research was to “understand the subjective world of human experience” of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 22). By taking account of the different perspectives of the individuals who were the subjects of research, the researcher ensured that interpretation was grounded in people’s practical realities. The interpretive approach is sensitive to context and is, therefore, distinct from interest in prediction and control. Caution was used in relation to the interpretive accounts by not seeking to reinterpret the action and experiences of the participants. Thus the interpretive approach used in this research aimed to generate deep,

extensive, and systematic representation of reality from the point of view of those directly involved in leading professional learning of RE in Catholic primary schools.

Some critics lament the “highly subjective and pre-scientific accounts noting the inability of the interpretive approach to produce valid knowledge in the form of wide ranging generalisations” (Carr & Kemmis, 1983, p. 94). However, the aim of this inquiry was to develop an understanding of individual cases and to generate theory across these rather than seeking collective generalisations. Whilst other critics highlight the absence of conventional benchmarks of scientific rigour such as internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity in contrast, Heck and Hallinger (1999) recognised that the strength of this approach was its ability to illuminate that about which little is known. In this research the attempts to explore the leadership role of the REC in professional learning and “learn the personal reasons or motives that shape a person’s internal feelings and guide decisions to act in particular ways” (Neuman, 2006, p. 70) enabled rich data to be gathered about this complex matter. The interpretivist perspective achieved a consistency between the direction of the research, the data collection and the data analysis which is explained in more detail later in this chapter.

Given the aforementioned interpretivist tenets, it followed that this research was especially concerned with participants’ beliefs, feelings and interpretations and how they made meaning of their world. This study also sought the personal knowledge of REC’s, principals, RE classroom teachers and CEO personnel, gained through their interactions with peers within specific learning environments. A particular lens within the interpretivist perspective is that of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism

A form of Interpretivism, symbolic interactionism is a major theoretical perspective in qualitative research (Hewitt, 2003). Formulated by Blumer (1969), it originates from the field of social psychology and explores how people make sense of their world in a dynamic process of social interaction. It has been acclaimed as a legitimate theoretical perspective for social inquiry (Charon 2007). “Symbolic Interactionism is theoretically focussed on the acting individual rather than on the social system” (Bowers, 1989, p. 36). Because this perspective focuses on dynamic relationships between meaning and actions, it addresses the

active processes through which people create and mediate meanings (Charmaz, 2007). Bowers (1989) explained, “For the symbolic interactionist, objects have no inherent meaning. Their meaning is derived from how people act towards them” (p. 38). When this supposition is transferred to the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators, it is clear that the meaning of the REC leadership role is determined by how others act towards REC’s, how they are perceived by principals, CEO personnel and how they are seen by other RECs and by the RE classroom teachers with whom they work. According to symbolic interaction RECs are in a continual process of interpretation and definition as they move from one situation to another.

Essential to symbolic interactionism is the notion of people as active and creative constructors of their own actions and meanings (Charon, 2007). The RECs were the most reliable interpreters of their world and are a valuable and direct source of knowledge about their leadership role in professional learning. As the researcher entered into the world of the REC, theories were developed regarding how they led professional learning in RE. The perspectives, meaning and understandings of those intimately associated with this inquiry helped to construct new knowledge about this context, and thereby brought greater clarification and possibilities. The perspective of symbolic interactionism was deemed most appropriate to this research problem which was pragmatic in nature.

The symbolic interactionist perspective puts the individuals and their interaction with each other into the picture, with a focus on language and action. Language – a symbolic means of communication – represents and interprets reality (Charon, 2007). Through the data collection (survey, focus groups and interviews) the relationships between the professional learning and the leadership actions of the REC were illuminated. The data collection in this thesis recognised the constructivist world of the participants, and the researcher, upon entering the known world of the respondents was also a socially constructivist learner.

Research Methodology

Introduction

Methodology provides a rationale to orchestrate the use of particular research methods. Whilst it is not possible to find methodologies that have broad consensus across the disciplines contesting the field, it is possible to achieve congruence between the epistemological perspectives that were subscribed to by the researcher and the philosophical points of view implied in the methodology. In the context of this study, the chosen methodology assisted the researcher to complete an in-depth investigation of the experiences of professional learning leadership in and for the role of REC, as well as identify patterns emerging from the data analysis. Symbolic interactionism and GT have strong compatibilities (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) as the roots of GT can be traced back to a movement known as Symbolic interactionism. The principles of symbolic interactionism were the basic foundation for the two American scholars who discovered GT. They shared the belief that the developed theory is ultimately grounded in the behaviours and actions of those under study (Goulding, 2002). “Like symbolic interactionists, grounded theorists assume that people act as individuals and as collectivities. The symbolic interactionist emphasis on meaning and action complements the question grounded theorists pose in the empirical world: What is happening? (Glaser, 1978,)” as cited in (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 21).

The choice of this methodology complemented the unique character and purpose of the study. GT is a holistic approach to research for the purpose of studying social phenomena from the ground up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It provided, as Suddaby (2006, p. 634) explained, “ideal ground in which systematic data collection could be used to develop theories that address the interpretive realities of actors in social settings”. In the context of this study, this methodology assisted the researcher to complete an in-depth investigation of the experiences of professional learning leadership in and for the role of REC as well as identify patterns emerging from the data analysis. Creswell (2009) further validated the purpose of GT when he claimed that “as a systematic process grounded theory exhibits the rigour quantitative researchers like to see in an educational study” (p. 447).

GT as the Foundation of the Research Methodology

GT is best understood historically. It is a specific research methodology, introduced in 1967, by Glaser and Strauss in their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. These sociologists articulated a middle ground in which systematic data collection could be used to develop theories that address the interpretive realities of actors in a social setting. As a reaction against the extreme positivism that had permeated social research, they argued that “scientific truth results from both the act of observation and the emerging consensus within a community of observers as they make sense of what they have observed” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 633). Since the initial publication, researchers claiming to base their work on GT principles have steadily increased and GT has been described as “the most frequently discussed, debated and disputed of the research methods” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 547). Interestingly Glaser and Strauss’s sociological research program on the terminally ill in hospitals (Charmaz, 2007) crafted a research process method which subsequently involved “a methodological split between its co-originators” (Ary et al., 2010; Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 547). In recent years there has been much discussion and debate about the analysis of GT. As the originators diverged on methods of analysis, from the onset it is necessary to advise that this study draws on the original concept of GT espoused by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and reiterated by Glaser (1998). The particularities of this distinction are elaborated upon later in this chapter.

GT: Underlying assumptions.

The self defined purpose of GT is to develop theory about phenomena of interest. The GT perspective locates the phenomena of human experience within the world of social interaction. As the name suggests, the theory is grounded in data, which has been systematically obtained and analysed through “social” research. GT has been described as an organic process of theory emergence and contains many unique characteristics that are designed to maintain the ‘groundedness’ of the approach. The research is inductive and emerging as it is shaped from the “ground” up, rather than handed down from a theory or perspective of the inquirer (Creswell, 2013).

GT was deemed appropriate for this study as it provided “a means for developing theory in which theories are presently inadequate or nonexistent” (Creswell, 2009, p. 447). A desirable feature was that substantive theory has a specificity and hence, usefulness to

practice, often lacking in the theories that cover more global concerns. It has been established that this was helpful to illuminate the leadership role of the REC in professional learning initiatives, an area where little is already known. Further, the appeal of GT was that it aimed to understand the research situation, to investigate the actualities in the real world of Catholic primary contexts. It was explicitly emergent as it sought to discover what theory accounts for the research situation as it is. Both Glaser and Strauss shared a belief in the importance of theory grounded in reality (Goulding, 2002). Therefore, GT was responsive to the situation as there was a continuing search for evidence which either confirmed or disconfirmed the emerging theory.

The foundations of GT are embedded in symbolic interactionism which assumes that one's communications and actions express meaning. "A principle tenet is that humans come to understand collective social definitions through the socialisation process" (Goulding, 2002, p. 39). Grounded theorists assume that meaning is dynamic; theory evolves during the research process itself and is a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis. This methodology enabled the researcher to move from the systematic collection of data to the generation of multivariate conceptual theory. With an emphasis on theory development and building, theory emerged from data through a process of constant comparison of categories. The constant comparison process is elaborated in more detail later in this chapter.

As constant comparison is a fundamental feature of GT, an in-depth understanding of constant comparison is presented beginning with the influence of the founders, Glaser and Strauss (1967), who explained "To avoid confusion we must therefore be clear at the outset as to our own use for comparative analysis- the generation of theory" (p. 21). In their seminal book, the chapter entitled "*Generating theory*," explains the process of constant comparison: "Naturally we wish to be as sure of our evidence as possible and will therefore check on it as often as we can" (p. 23). More recently the process of conducting GT has been described (Hayes, 2000, p. 184) as iterative, that is;

a process in which theoretical insights emerge or are discovered in the data, those insights are then tested to see how they can make sense of the other parts of the data, which, in turn, produce their own theoretical insights which are then tested again against the data, and so on.

In this research an understanding of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning emerged in a cumulative way throughout the interconnected phases of data collection and analysis and writing (Suddaby, 2006).

The Glaserian approach to GT

As had been stated previously there are two versions of GT, both with very different approaches. Glaser (1972) was opposed to the meticulous, strict and complex three stage coding approach of the Strauss and Corbin version. His strong reaction to Strauss and Corbin's systematic coding was vociferously documented in 1992 when he critiqued their work and claimed: "Strauss's book is without conscience, bordering on immorality" (p. 3). He suggested it was a methodology but it was not GT claiming it fractured the data. To Glaser, the Straussarian school signified an erosion of GT (Stern, 1994). Instead Glaser suggested that researchers seek the underlying patterns amid the many perspectives in which participants present, insisting that these "can be identified by adding an abstract layer of conceptualisation which helps to distance you from the data and should allow you to see the patterns more clearly"(Grbich, 2007, p. 72). Another point of departure was that Glaser argued that the theory should only explain the phenomenon under discovery. In this research the influence of Glaser's view to esteem coding by constant comparison with the aim of theory generation was the preferred approach. The researcher valued that this approach was closer to field based research with less emphasis on coding and more on discovery and theory generation as opposed to theory verification. Therefore, a substantive theory was developed about the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in Catholic primary schools.

Limitations of GT

GT also has a number of limitations of which the researcher was conscious and sought to address. One of these weaknesses was its distinct language that may be deemed as jargon and requires explicit explanation (Creswell, 2009). To overcome the criticism that terms are not always clearly defined, key terms are provided below to minimize misunderstanding.

Defining the key terms.

A category is a theme or variable which encapsulates what an informant has said. It is interpreted in the light of the situation, other interviews and emerging theory. Categories are generated from the data.

Properties are generated concepts about categories sometimes referred to as sub categories.

A core category is described as a category which has been found to emerge with high frequency and is connected to and helps to explain other categories (Glaser 1978).

Constant comparative method, as the name implies, involves comparing like with like, to look for emerging patterns and themes. Glaser (1978) warns of the dangers of placing *too* much emphasis on one particular coding family, or forcing the data to fit within the parameters of these theoretical codes.

Memoing in conjunction with coding, the researcher is simultaneously engaged in the process of memoing regarding insights one derives from coding and reflecting on the data. Glaser (1978) directed that memos are a core stage and without using them theoretically to write up ideas, the researcher is not undertaking GT.

Saturation is said to occur when in collecting and interpreting data no new category emerges. It is achieved through staying in the field until no new data emerges which can confirm or underpin the development of the theoretical viewpoint (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

GT is a complex process and a systematic approach which develops theory derived directly from the data. Consequently the grounded theorist must adopt flexible strategies (Charmaz, 2007). Despite the different perspectives about conducting grounded research these inductive perspectives value the importance of generating theory from the perspective of the participants. Consequently an important component of this study was for the researcher to avoid preconceptions and let categories '*emerge*' from the data (Dey, 2007).

Theories generated using GT are interpretations made from given perspectives, and are, therefore, fallible. Social processes are ubiquitous throughout an organisation, therefore a range of relevant parties was chosen in this study. The data collection stages cannot be separated from the interpretive process. This process was not necessarily straightforward and consistent with the work of Glaser (1998), a lack of clarity was experienced in the course of allowing the theories to emerge. In order to overcome this, the researcher strived to remember that GT cannot be obtained by means of an inflexible formula.

Whilst findings are not able to be generalised, a further criticism is that the study can be open to bias and subjectivity, particularly to that of the researcher, "a tendency to confirm the researchers preconceived notions" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 234). Personal discipline assisted

the researcher in avoiding excessive subjectivity and a rigorous, self-conscious examination for bias was required at each stage of the research process (Goulding, 2002). For this reason the researcher explicitly stated the background context and particular perspective that she brought to the study. As “all writing is “positioned” and within a stance,” Creswell (2013, p. 215) this positionality will be discussed in more detail on pages 107-108. Several steps were taken during analysis to help facilitate trustworthiness. Following the advice of Glaser and Strauss (1967), who claimed: “it is also a good idea to discuss the theoretical notions with one or more team mates” (p. 107), the assistance of a “critical friend” to bring another eye to the transcripts and confirm consistency of coding was sought. Occasionally the developing research interpretations were shared with this critical friend for critique, as was the final research report. Discrepancies between data and developing interpretations were shared for elaboration and feedback.

The process of analysis

The data analysis adopted for the purposes of this research drew on GT traditions with data analysis commencing from the very point of data collection. As a fundamental feature of GT is the application of constant comparison, the major technique used in this research was the constant comparison method. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) “The constant comparative method is designed to aid the analyst, who possess these abilities in generating theory that is integrated, plausible, close to the data” (p. 103). The originators detailed the constant comparative method and explained

Although this method of generating theory is a continuously growing process - each stage after a time is transformed into the next - earlier stages do remain in operation simultaneously throughout the analysis and each provides continuous development to its successive stage until the analysis is terminated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105).

In 1978, Glaser confirmed that these steps do not always occur in sequence but often in overlapping ways. The initial data generates the need to collect more data as a result of theorising about why and how data may tell similar or different stories. The core categories that emerged in this research were a result of several sorting processes.

GT is characterised by a number of conceptual levels. The first level is the data itself. The second level captures the underlying patterns within the data and the third is the integration and sorting into theory of these insights (Glaser, 1998). A decision to consolidate the emerging theory through constant comparison with experts in the field was intended to take the study beyond description to a new level – substantive theory (Goulding, 1999; 2002).

Charmaz (2006) explains “The sharp distinction between data collection and analysis phases of traditional research is intentionally blurred in GT studies” (p. 188). Data collection and analysis were consciously combined, and initial data analysis was used to shape continuing data collection. In this manner, “the method is designed to encourage researchers’ persistent interaction with their data, whilst remaining constantly involved with their emerging analyses” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 1). In this research an understanding of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning emerged in a cumulative way throughout the interconnected phases of data collection and analysis and writing (Suddaby, 2006). By constantly asking questions of the data the theoretically sensitive researcher is “able to develop a deeper and deeper understanding of the phenomena” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 83). The value of being *theoretically sensitive* was highlighted by Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 36) who argued “The sociologist should also be sufficiently *theoretically sensitive* so that he [she] can conceptualise and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data”. Theoretical sensitivity is one area where Glaser has held stronger views than Strauss. According to Glaser (1978), “Sensitivity is necessarily increased by being steeped in the literature that deals with both the kinds of variable and their associated general ideas that will be used” (p. 3). The structure of the data collection through the constant comparison process meant that the theorising of the data was put into place very early. This movement between the data, literature and theories served to consolidate the data and theory in a theory generation process which will be explained further in the next section of this chapter.

Allan (2003) explained GT coding as a form of content analysis to find and conceptualize underlying issues “amongst the noise of the data” (p. 1). Put simply the documentation process involved key steps; the recording of data, the transcribing and editing of the data, the coding of the data and the construction of the new reality (Hodder, 2003). However others claim data analysis is a more dynamic, complex and iterative process whereby the researcher relentlessly examines, monitors reviews, interprets and tests data

(Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). As has been discussed in this study, data analysis occurred simultaneously using constant comparative data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Emerging insights and tentative hypotheses directed the next phase of data collection which sequentially led to refinement or reformulation, although not in a linear process. The first stage, the surveys, provided beginning concepts and hunches which were further explored within the focus groups and interviews. Initial analysis of data from stage two enabled the emergence of new themes, reaffirming of themes and discounting of relevant themes. During this process the researcher explored and sensitively interpreted complex data. This necessitated familiarity with the data, giving attention to what was there rather than what was expected. It was necessary to facilitate insights or ideas which emerged during the analysis whilst avoiding pre-emptively reducing the data. Boeije (2002, p. 393) explained, “the cycle of comparison and reflection on ‘old’ and ‘new’ data can be repeated several times”. Sorting occurred when categories are saturated, writing follows.

Figure 3:1. attempts to illustrate how the researcher continued to sort and examine any new data through a constant comparative process until theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Another contentious issue in this approach is the uncertainty as to when to stop the analysis. GT does not have a clearly demarcated point for ending, therefore high levels of acumen on the part of the researcher were needed when the researcher no longer heard or saw new information. According to Goulding (2002), the developed theory “should be true to the data, it should be parsimonious” (p. 46). A well documented mistake of GT is coming to a closure prematurely (Goulding, 2002). The multiple forms of data gathered and described in this study are presented in *Figure 3:1. Representation of Constant comparative Analysis* (adapted from Mc Laughlin, 2010; Merriam, 1998).

importance of note taking in the field and memoing, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), was an important component which assisted in the identification of categories which emerged from the data analysis.

Writing the theory

Writing the theory is a complicated task (Goulding, 2002). In GT the researcher is challenged to “write the theory in such way that it demonstrates to the reader how concepts “emerged” and developed from the data, how the researcher moved from description through the process of abstraction, and how core categories were generated” (Goulding, 2002, p. 90). The movement from patterns noted, relationships tentatively identified, through to conceptual identification and final theorising was not simple. Glaser (1978) maintained that credibility is obtained through the theory’s integration, relevance and workability. The concepts are grounded *not* proven. In the findings chapters which follow, quotes directly from surveys, focus group conversations and interviews (and other telling phrases obtained by informants) are analysed and provided in the hope that the theory will be traceable back to the evidence. Further, the theory is supported by extracts which illustrate the “fit” between conceptual abstraction and reality.

Purposeful sampling and GT.

The original authors of GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) advocated theoretical sampling, that is sampling that is controlled by emergent theory as a central tenet of their method (Coyne, 1997). As categories or properties begin to emerge other participants are sought in order to test the emerging theory. It has been suggested that Glaser and Strauss never intended a rigid adherence to their terminology as they declared “ because this is only a beginning, we shall often state the positions, counter positions and examples, rather than offering clear cut procedures and definitions ”(1967, p. 1). In this study, the researcher deviated from the original approach and used purposeful sampling, that is a sample which conforms to an initial set of criteria which was worked out prior to the beginning of the study. Patton (2002) describes 15 different strategies for purposefully selecting information rich cases: “The underlying principle that is common to all these strategies is selecting information rich cases that is, cases that are selected primarily to fit the study” (Coyne, 1997, p. 627). In this research the sample was not varied according to the emerging theory rather it was

intentionally selected for the information rich data that it may yield on the phenomenon of RECs leading professional learning. The researcher did however, apply the method of GT, that is the constant comparative method leading to emerging categories and theories, to the data.

Participants

The boundaries of this research were identified in terms of the key stakeholders who influence the leadership responsibilities of the REC in professional learning within Catholic primary schools. Thus the deliberate selection of participants was based on the purpose of the study and therefore ensured the data addressed the research question (Hoare, 2006; Trochim, 2006). By intentionally selecting individuals to learn more about and better understand the leadership role of the REC in professional learning, purposive selection allowed access to key stakeholders who were judiciously chosen using the following inclusion criteria:

1. Staff registered in Victoria in Catholic primary schools
2. Fulltime, permanent employees within Diocese
3. Current REC and/or principal with five or more years in the leadership role.

This purposefully selected group helped the researcher canvass the view of a range of relevant perspectives of professional learning in RE. Invitations to complete the surveys and attend the focus groups or interviews were sent to eligible participants. The invitation included a letter of introduction from the researcher (Appendix 1) detailing the research project, a copy of the consent forms for persons participating in research (Appendix 2) as outlined by the ACU Research Projects Ethics Committee and verification that approval to conduct the research had been obtained (Permission from the Director of Catholic Education and ACU Ethics consent (Appendix 3).

Table 3.2. summarizes information about the participants involved in the collection of data in this research.

Table 3.2.
Summary of Data Collection Participants

Categories of Participants	Data Collection Strategies				
	<i>Lime online Survey</i>	<i>Individual Interviews</i>	<i>Focus Group 1</i>	<i>Focus Group 2</i>	Total Participants
Interested RE teachers	123				123
RECs	15	5	4	5	29
Principals		6	5		11
CEO Representatives		4 (1 per diocese)			4
TOTAL	138	15	14		167

Recruiting participants was aided by the opportunity for participants to contribute their expertise and experience to an issue which is of concern to all involved in this research.

Data Gathering Strategies

Introduction

As this research was essentially interpretative in design, it was appropriate to select methods of data collection which readily allowed for participants to share their world views and the successes and challenges which they experienced in their role of leading and implementing professional learning opportunities in RE within Catholic primary schools. Three research methods were utilised in order to gather and organise the data for this study. The value of having a number of data collection strategies in qualitative studies to improve the likelihood that a deep understanding of the situation is gained is reinforced by Richards and Morse (2007), “relying on one technique may produce homogenous data, which are unlikely to provide enough sources of understanding and ways of looking at a situation or a problem” (p. 78).

The major actions in the research process were designed to answer the research question and involved gathering data from a range of sources over time. Open ended surveys,

focus groups and interviews explored the lived reality of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. These various methods enabled the researcher to investigate the leadership role of the REC in light of the purpose of this study. The decision to choose a range of distinct but related data collection methods meant the data could be cross checked. Careful consideration ensured the methods of data gathering were in synergy with the interpretive theoretical framework of this study. GT allows for multiple data sources (Goulding, 2002) and data collection, like interviews and focus groups, are suited to GT. As in many forms of qualitative research, surveys/interviews, focus groups are a favoured means to confirm the emerging findings and were therefore, employed in this study.

Table 3.3.
Overview of each stage of Data Gathering

PURPOSE: To explore the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in Catholic primary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese			
STAGE	AREA OF FOCUS	RESEARCH SUB QUESTIONS	METHOD SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES
1	The mindset of practitioners	According to key stakeholders what models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of Religious educators in Catholic Primary schools?	Online Anonymous Lime survey Interested RE classroom teachers RECs
2	Implications for practice	According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen and challenge the REC in leading professional learning in RE?	Focus groups RECs Principals
3	Expectations of key stakeholders	According to key stakeholders how do they perceive and value the leadership role of the REC in professional learning?	Unstructured Interviews RECs Principals CEO representatives
RESEARCH QUESTION: According to key stakeholders how can RECs lead professional learning of religious educators in the Melbourne Archdiocese to encourage teacher and student learning?			

The range of data collection employed in this study is presented next, followed by a detailed description of each component.

Surveys

As surveys allow a large coverage of participants within a short time frame (Neuman, 2006), they provided valuable insights into the currently held beliefs, attitudes and opinions of participants (Creswell, 2013; Silverman, 2005). They also provided anonymously, a low threat means of obtaining relevant confirmation about a participant's past experience. It was deemed beneficial to employ a survey early in the research to obtain a general picture and to decide how to focus other data methods. A survey was designed for interested RE classroom teachers to solicit opinions on a number of professional learning issues, as well as descriptive information on professional learning activities and initiatives. As response rates in surveys are commonly low, after investigation, an electronic Lime survey was devised to maximize the rate of potential participants. This is presented in Appendix 4. This tool enabled an efficient way of collecting and managing large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time.

To guard against ambiguous and vague language the survey was piloted. This pretest survey improved consistency and uniformity and assisted to make the questions more clear, concise and unambiguous so as to elicit the greatest amount of information from participants (Creswell, 2013). As the structured nature of a survey did not permit exploration of emerging and unanticipated issues, this lack of flexibility was reduced by the inclusion of a final optional box which was added to this data gathering instrument to invite participants to provide any additional comments observations or information about the professional learning of religious educators in the primary Catholic context that they wished to share. This inclusion proved valuable as nearly half of the participants availed themselves of this opportunity.

A total of 250 invitations were distributed electronically to Catholic primary principals in the Melbourne Archdiocese. This email sought permission to invite interested RE classroom teachers to participate in the five minute electronic survey and informed and invited them to complete the survey. A reminder was sent via email four to six weeks later, which increased the response rate. The use of an online reminder to non responding participants helped ameliorate a larger decrease in the survey response rate, as well as resulting in a faster turnaround time from survey dispatch in comparison to the traditional mail out means. In total 123 were completed. This response rate, of just fewer than 50% response rate is

considered acceptable for a population such as this (Creswell, 2002). This acknowledged the importance attributed to professional learning by religious educators.

The second participants' survey for RECs, again was an online lime survey. This provided a "snap shot" of a number of REC's beliefs and attitudes concerning their leadership role in professional learning. It was a context specific instrument designed to collect data on the models and approaches to professional learning best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools. Fifty eligible RECs were invited through their principal to complete an anonymous short open ended electronic survey. Fifteen RECs responded which equated to a 30% response rate. Participants were invited to answer the following questions:

- What forms of professional learning in RE have you used?
- Which models/approaches to professional learning are most effective for your RE staff?
- How would you describe your leadership role in the professional learning of RE staff at your school?

These open ended questions provided an opportunity for respondents to consider the leadership dimension of their roles and to elicit a brief description of the nature and the usual amount of time associated with the leadership of professional learning in RE. They were also asked to comment on the successes and challenges of their professional learning leadership role and indicate the level of support they receive.

Both surveys provided valuable insights into the design of a more focused exploration through focus groups and unstructured interviews. This meant that the findings from early data collections helped to refine the structure of the interview process and inform the focus group and interview questions, thereby enabling the progressive construction of knowledge and meaning. As well as establishing demographic information, the surveys enabled cross referencing to other data collection strategies used in this study.

Focus Group

In this research, focus groups were a process of collecting data through group interviews with RECs and principals (typically a group of four). They were structured to foster talk among the participants about the subject of interest, leading professional learning. A focus group interview is defined as a qualitative data gathering technique which sees a small group of

participants interacting with a researcher in order to collect shared understandings around certain phenomena (Creswell, 2009).

Focus groups were selected for this research for multiple reasons. They promoted time efficiency by allowing multiple meanings and perspectives (Barbour, 2007), they provided rich more contextualised data to aid research in understanding the experiences of participants (Cohen & Manion, 2007) and had the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues not possible with surveys. They also allowed the informants who were cooperative with each other to “react to and build on the responses of other group members” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, p. 43).

However, some limitations must be noted. As Gibbs (2007) suggested the focus groups were difficult to organise despite ongoing negotiations with relevant participants. The researcher provided questions to participants to focus and direct discussion and interaction with other group members and encouraged all participants to contribute to discussion and confirm by summary as to consensus or not of discussion points. As focus groups to some degree rely on the facilitation and moderator skills of the researcher, a mock session helped the researcher to improve her skills such as body language, tone, understanding the language and culture of the respondents, gaining trust and establishing rapport. An interview guide (Yin, 2010) with probes encouraged participants to feel more at ease and talk freely. This interview protocol (Creswell, 2013), appears in Appendix 5. However, the researcher was also conscious of the need to minimise her influence on the data collections (Fontana & Frey, 2003). Consequently, whilst the focus groups enabled discussion that was controlled by the researcher as a moderator, care was taken that the data arose out of the interaction between group members, rather than from interaction between the researcher as moderator and the group.

Whilst there was maintenance of focus on the research questions and purpose, it was also necessary to be flexible. A small number of general questions was asked as prompts in order to elicit responses from all participants. The focus groups provided insight into participants’ feelings and opinions (Barbour, 2007) and their design was such that questions being asked were contextually relevant and easily understood by participants (Webb, 2002). With permission, the focus groups were recorded with the use of a small inconspicuous device placed to the side. A coding system and notes assisted the researcher as a

transcriptionist to discriminate voices. Full transcriptions were made of the conversations and the information was analysed immediately after each focus group meeting. After each session, field notes, and transcriptions were read and reread. They were then coded, data with similar codes were grouped and interpretations supported by coded data were recorded.

Unstructured Interviews

Interviews have been identified as the most widely applied technique for conducting systematic social enquiry in all forms of qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). Interviews are described as a purposeful conversation that is directed by one in order to get information from the other. This allowed the researcher to “enter into the other person’s perspective... to gather their stories” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). This technique was chosen because it provided the researcher with important insights into the phenomenon being studied (leadership of professional learning) from the perspective of the various participants. There are three main types of interviews. These are unstructured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008); semi structured (Brown & Dowling, 1998) and the structured (Brown & Dowling, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Unstructured interviews or informal interviews (sometimes called loosely structured) were selected as they use open ended questions and are flexible and exploratory. Unstructured interviews were very appropriate for GT as applied in this study, as they enabled in-depth interviewing, which allowed the researcher to come to a fuller understanding of exactly how the REC role was perceived, and to more fully appreciate the complexities inherently involved in the leadership of professional learning in RE. To verify and elaborate on the survey responses and focus group responses, in stage one and two, approximately forty minute interviews were conducted with a variety of respondents including principals, RECs and CEO Representatives.

The unstructured interviews helped to provide a valuable means to give participants an opportunity to share their story with minimal interruption by the researcher (Richards & Morse, 2007). They gave interviewees the freedom to recall and expand on events (O’Donoghue, 2007) and were helpful to enable a better understanding of the information gathered by other means in stage one and stage two of the research. It was also possible to corroborate interview data with information from the other data sources.

Whilst an obvious strength of the interview process is the richness and vividness of the data uncovered, (Gilham 2005) the quality of the data remains dependent on the skills of

the researcher as an interviewer. Much literature confirmed that good interviews require practice (Bailey, 2007; Gilham 2005; Kvale, 2009), therefore before undertaking the first interview, a pilot interview was conducted with a colleague for feedback purposes. As interviewing is a complex act which requires key attributes and skills, this pilot interview strengthened the implementation of future interviews. As a means to further improve the data collection, interviewees were given an aide memoire prior to the scheduled interview to allow reflective time in which to consider the concepts for discussion, thereby allowing optimal opportunity for rich data collection (O'Donoghue, 2007). As some critics contended that this conversation may be deemed artificial as the "the researcher defines and controls the situation" (Kvale, 2009, p. 7), so every attempt was made to counter this claim. Due attention was given to ensure that the researcher sought information from the perspective of the informant by valuing and acknowledging their perspectives. Again a checklist for preparing, conducting and reviewing the interview was prepared. This checklist oriented the interviewee towards the research interest and assisted in monitoring the extent to which the participants shared relevant insights which helped achieve the purpose of the study. Although unstructured interviews can seem like normal everyday conversations, "it is always a controlled conversation which is geared to the interviewer's research interests" (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 2008, p. 53). As the interviews were based on the issues raised in previous data collection it was more likely that the respondents were confident in responding to the questions which increased the reliability of the data. Participants were invited to:

- Describe the responsibility of the REC in leading professional learning for religious educators
- Comment on the strengths and challenges of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning
- Identify models they found to be effective for leading professional learning

Despite claims that interviews can be time consuming, in the search to further access and elicit valid information about the leadership role of the REC in professional learning, the interviews generated rich and detailed accounts of the individual's experience making this method attractive.

Immediately after each interview field notes were written, interviews were immediately transcribed. As agreed they were returned to the respondents for validation. Draft transcripts were given to the interviewees so that where ambiguities arose, the meaning

that the interviewee was trying to convey could be clarified. In this way, provision was made for the trustworthiness of the research data. Subsequent analysis of meaning occurred through both listening to the recording and re-reading the responses provided through transcription (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). When analyzing the interview data, the GT research approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to identify, describe and interpret distinctly different issues faced by participants.

Each data collection method contains some limitations and dangers (Neuman, 2006) and, as has been previously discussed, the researcher attempted to “recognize the strengths and weaknesses of particular investigative instruments” (Gibbons & Sanderson, 2002, p. 20). As the possible weakness and deficiencies of the proposed data collection methods were identified these often very legitimate challenges were mitigated as much as possible. However, despite the best intentions of the researcher it is acknowledged that “irrespective of the ontological standpoint conceived and the epistemology devised, to ask and respond to the research questions, the method to complement these aspects will, inevitably, pose certain liabilities” (Cavanagh & Reynolds, 2005, p. 5). Some difficulties were also overcome as the participants and the researcher shared a mutual interest in RE and the research topic was of particular interest and significance to all involved in this research.

Background of Researcher

As surveys, interviews and focus groups are all designed and implemented by humans, the intrusion of the researcher’s bias is inevitable (Patton, 2002). Within this study the researcher was responsible for the collection and analysis of data and was cognizant of the challenge of representing faithfully the world of the other, and of acknowledging and critiquing the role of the researcher in the role of inquiry. In any interpretive research, as the researcher it is important to outline any bias or assumptions that may have an impact on the inquiry. Therefore it is opportune to make explicit any background experience that might influence the research and its findings.

Several scholars recognized that the life experience/context of the researcher is not separate from the research undertaken (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Richardson, 2003), nonetheless, according to Haskell, Linds and Ippolito (2002)

Our work is in many ways an expression of who we are and who we are becoming, we can interact with our connection to the research not as a liability to be guarded

against, but as an opportunity to make the research more meaningful by more fully appreciating our part as researcher in it (par, 2).

As has been previously noted, the researcher is currently working at ACU as a lecturer within the Faculty of Education. In this capacity the researcher displays a special interest in leadership and RE. Prior to this as an employee of the CEOM for eleven years, the researcher worked closely with CEO personnel, principals RECs' and classroom teachers across three regions of the Melbourne Archdiocese. For this reason, the relationship between the researcher and some participants was professional and friendly. A collegial relationship (Williams, 2003) based on a positive and trusting rapport necessary to commence and sustain an investigation into the realities of the leadership role of the REC already existed. Moreover, the initial step within the research process whereby the researcher needs to get to know the participants, had in some instances, already occurred. Further it may be argued that this prior knowledge helped the participants to feel more comfortable sharing information and to "close the hierarchical gap between researchers and respondents" (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 159). Conversely it may be argued that a pre existing friendly relationship with participants can cause inherent difficulties and may bias data selection and minimize objectivity (Glesne 2011). Whilst this limitation may have adversely affected potential validity to some extent, minimization of this possible bias was achieved by the selection process. Eligible participants were selected using rigorous criteria (cf., p. 99) to avoid confounding the results. The researcher guarded against complacency, over-familiarity and the intrusion of personal bias and opinions. Further the use of multiple methods or triangulation of data collection not only maximized and enriched data but was a conscious attempt to minimize the researcher's influence on the data.

In accordance with the principles of GT the researcher strove to maintain the attitude of a learner and attempted to suspend preconceptions always remaining open to discovery and sensitive to the emergence of theory. This role was best described as a "co-learner". Further, it was deliberately recognized that the study "will not be limited to finding and confirming what was expected to be the result, but will produce new insights and ways of seeing the things and persons that have been studied " (Flick, 2006, p. 64). At this junction it is necessary to recognise the place of literature in GT. The literature review has dual proposes. It provides a theoretical background to the study and enables new insights and theory generated from the study to be located in an existing body of knowledge (Kumar, 2005). As the researcher it was necessary to be open to discovery which may even turn out to

be at odds with current theory. Critical reflection occurred as part of the analysis and interpretation of the data. Further it is recognised that if the knowledge is similar to that discovered by someone else, according to Dick (2005) the results of GT will have provided empirical base from another sources and therefore will have complemented other work. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 4) argued

Theory based on data can usually not be completely refuted by more data or replaced by another theory. Since it is too intimately linked to data, it is destined to last despite its inevitable modification and reformulation.....However grounded theories - which take hard study of much data - are worth the precious time and focus of us all in our research, study and teaching.

This sentiment is especially important when reading and considering the findings chapters. The employment of a variety of data sources ensured completeness and helped avoid or prevent errors and distortions (Sarantakos, 1998). Strategies were designed to penetrate the social construction of reality as understood by each participant, RE classroom teacher, REC, principal and CEO representative.

Data Gathering Time Frame.

The integrative nature of the chosen data collection strategies enabled the researcher to build upon data as the study unfolded. The implementation of this research project began in Semester 1, 2011 to Semester 2, 2012. The timeframe and order of data collection strategies are outlined in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4.
Data Gathering Time Frame

Data Gathering Method	Participants	Time Frame
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interested RE teachers • Eligible RECs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semester 1, 2011 • Semester 1, 2011
Focus group interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RECs – X 2 • Principals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semester 1, 2012 • Semester 1, 2012
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RECs • Principals • CEO Personnel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semester 2, 2012 • Semester 2, 2012 • Semester 2, 2012

As has been established earlier in this chapter, GT primarily employs an inductive research strategy. Therefore the data was analyzed using inductive methods, (Crotty, 2003) as opposed to deductive methods as theories of the role of the REC as leader of professional learning emerge from the data (Glaser, 1998; 1992; 1978). Consequently, primarily the research reported on what REC's and relevant stakeholders said about their leadership role of the REC in professional learning and their conceptualization of that role. REC leadership was explored by how others act towards them and how they are perceived by key stakeholders. These varied perceptions ensured that due attention was given to what REC's and key stakeholders said about their role and how it was described and analyzed. The data was analyzed in collaboration with the participants, to elucidate the complex and multiple meanings and relationships that exist within the Catholic primary education settings.

Verifications of the Study

Introduction

Multiple perspectives exist regarding the importance of validity, its definition and procedures for establishing it. Researchers strive for high validity and high reliability. Validity may be defined as "how accurately the account represents the participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible for them" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124). The researcher actively incorporated multiple validity strategies (Creswell, 2013). Further, it can be argued that GT has what has been described as "a built in mandate to strive towards verification through the process of category saturation" (Goulding, 2002, p. 44).

This research was conducted within an interpretivist paradigm and centred on accurately representing individuals' reality of a particular social context. Consequently it was necessary that the research results obtained in this study were trustworthy.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the data obtained and the interpretations made captured the reality as seen from the perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Hence data quality was achieved through trustworthiness and this contributed to the plausibility of the study.

Credibility refers to the reader's confidence in the truth and interpretation of the data. A credible account of the data rings true both to the members in the setting and to the readers (Mertens, 2005; Patton, 2002). Given that the symbolic interactionist approach esteems the view point of the actor above all else, it follows that the actors were the only ones who could legitimately judge the credibility of the results. Therefore it was important to establish that the results were credible and believable from the perspective of the all participants in this research. The next section presents strategies to achieve credibility of the results.

Peer Debriefing

There were a number of precautions taken to improve the likelihood of providing subjects with a debriefing. Providing contact details at the beginning of the process, helped subjects to feel free to contact the researcher if they had any concerns after participating or at a later time if they wished to discontinue. Peers were provided with the opportunity to critique data quality and interpretive issues following focus groups and in-depth interviews. This strategy enhanced the credibility of the data.

Participant Checks

The verification commonly known as "member checking" (Creswell 2013), or respondent validation, was also used extensively in this study. In order to determine the accuracy of the findings (whether the participants felt that they were accurate), participants were provided with opportunities to review and make comment on the data and interpretations following all focus groups and interviews. This technique, "in which the investigator's account is compared with those of the research subjects to establish the level of correspondence between the two sets" (Mays & Pope, 2000, p. 51), was deliberate. Ensuring the final account of the raw data was accurate was a crucial step to maintain credibility (Anafara, Brown & Mangione, 2002). Further, it is argued this increased the accuracy of the findings and provided an opportunity to modify as relevant. All research is confounded by the problem that it is impossible to study something without having some effect on it commonly referred to as the observer *effect* or "*Heisenberg effect*" (Simonton, 2010). In order to minimize this every attempt was made to interact with subjects in a natural, unobtrusive and non-threatening manner.

Clarify the Bias the Researcher brings to the Study

A statement of the researcher's involvement with the participants and the research project, her experiences, assumptions and biases has already been provided. However, these were also guarded against by recording detailed reflections on her subjectivity and having field notes and other material checked by a "critical friend" as an additional check on bias. Every effort was also made to move beyond the researcher's personal understanding of the REC's leadership role in professional learning, to focus on the meanings others involved in this endeavor had constructed from their social interactions. However it is acknowledged that it is possible to talk of limiting the observer's biases not eliminating them (Bogdan & KnoppBiklen, 2007).

Using rich thick description to convey the findings/presenting negative information

Every effort was made to ensure that detailed descriptions about the settings, shared experiences and many perspectives offered meant that the findings were more realistic and rich (Merriam, 1988). This procedure added to the validity of the findings. Further, the accounts provided in the following findings chapters also recognized instances where contradictions occurred so that the account was more realistic and valid as it demonstrated that different perspectives of RE stakeholders did not always coalesce.

Triangulation

A commonly used technique to improve the internal validity is triangulation, however unfortunately this word is used in such imprecise ways that "it has become difficult to understand what is meant by it" (Bogdan & KnoppBiklen, 2007, p. 115). Triangulation was first borrowed from the social sciences to convey the idea that to establish a fact you need more than one source of information. Since triangulation has become part of qualitative research it has come to be described as using two or more methods of data collection. Triangulation was central to ensuring the quality of research (Bailey, 2007). Multiple sources of data were used to eliminate the threat of bias and to obtain confirmation of findings through the divergence of different perspectives. This led to a fuller understanding of the phenomena being studied and reduced the risk of systematic distortions inherent in the use of only one method (Creswell, 2013). A strengthening of this study design was a result of using a combination of methods to provide a more robust understanding which additionally

strengthened the trustworthiness of findings (Patton, 2002). However, it was recognised that rejecting data and conclusions just because triangulation identified inconsistencies would be imprudent (Bailey, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2013) described eight verification procedures commonly used in qualitative research. It is argued that the aforementioned considerations enhanced the validity and authenticity of this research and had been intentionally embedded in the design and implementation of this study.

Ethical Issues

Introduction

Increased awareness and concern over the ethics of educational research and researchers has reinforced the need for this researcher to be responsible, accountable and to work ethically, “All of us consider ourselves ethical; not perfect perhaps, but more ethical than most of humanity” (Babbie, 1983). In this study the relationship between researcher and subject was an ongoing and evolving one and ethical issues pertaining to the protection of participants were of paramount concern (Berg, 2007). It was necessary to introduce a set of procedures that requested, informed and reassured each level of the Catholic education system in their involvement with this research. Consequently ethical considerations were guided by the following:

Respecting the right of participants

Considerations for this study included not only safe guarding of the participants but also to be mindful of the need to morally and ethically care for and respect the privacy and well being of all involved. Accordingly the following occurred

- Participants entered the research project voluntarily and were adequately briefed about the nature of the study (Berg, 2007), the purpose, aims, the use of results, and the obligations and the likely social consequence the study may have on their life. They had the right to refuse to participate in the study or withdraw at any time.

- Consent forms systematically ensured that participants were *knowingly* participating in this study and were doing so of their own choice. In order to ensure privacy such forms were kept under careful guard.
- Participants were provided with a high degree of confidentiality. Procedures for the maintenance of confidentiality were clearly delineated in writing as were protocols for ensuring anonymity. Participants' anonymity was protected and guaranteed by the researcher by assigning pseudonyms (Berg, 2007; Glesne, 2011).
- Data storage, privacy and confidentiality was of the utmost importance and secured safely in accordance with ACU procedures and recommendations.
- Participants co-learned throughout the study and were co-workers in producing the information required by the study.

Honoring research sites

Respect was seen by the researcher viewing herself as a “guest” at the place of study and being sensitive to the possible intrusive nature of the research.

- Appropriate permissions from diocesan and school authorities were obtained before entering any site.

Reporting research fully and honestly

Given that this study was situated within the context of Catholic primary education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, ethical clearance was sought from the relevant governing bodies including ACU Ethics committee and the expressed formal permission of the Directors of the CEOs in Melbourne, Sale, Sandhurst and Ballarat.

The procedures of this research at all times conformed to the highest level of ethics requirements, therefore this research can be considered ethical in design methods, participants, analysis and findings.

Overview of Research Design

The purpose of this chapter was to explain and justify the research design. The research design presented was an attempt to illuminate “the logic that links the data to be collected (and the conclusions to be drawn) to the initial questions of the study” (Yin, 2013, p. 19).

The theoretical framework developed in this chapter is summarized in Table 3.5, which illustrates the consistent alignment of the key research principles as the study moves from its philosophical perspective to its practical methodology.

Table 3.5.
Overview and Timeline of the Research Design

Area of Focus	Method specific technique	Data source	Data Steps	Data analysis	Timeline
STAGE ONE					
The mindset of practitioners	Electronic Survey	Interested RE Classroom teachers RECs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generate questions Pilot/pretest survey Administer survey Collate, code and enter data Analyze to identify tentative themes emerging. This step assisted design of questions for focus group. Generate questions according to themes emanating from data analysis in stage one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data analysis begins with first data collection, beginning themes emerge Preliminary categories & sub categories established 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feb 2011- Pilot classroom electronic survey April 2011- Invitations sent to Principals –survey interested classroom teachers. Late April 2011-Reminder sent to Principals May 2011- Pilot REC electronic survey June 2011 –Invitations sent to Principals –survey RECs Reminder sent to Principals
STAGE TWO					
Implications for practice	Focus groups	REC X 2 Principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare questions for participants to focus and direct discussion. Pilot focus group questions Conduct regional focus groups (Audio tape with permission and transcribe) Participant analysis to check responses Analyze and code data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large amounts of data generated Data coding, data distillation (reduction) Constant comparative method of coding of data collected. Identify categories themes from data analysis. New categories/ themes emerge; other categories/ themes reaffirmed or discounted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dec 2011- pilot focus group Feb 2012-conduct focus groups- RECs May 2012- conduct focus groups- Principal) Verification of data
STAGE THREE					
Expectations of key stakeholders	Unstructured interviews	RECs Principals CEO Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select Individual interviewees & conduct unstructured interviews- RECs, principals, and CEO representatives Audio tape with permission & transcribe Participant analysis to check responses Analyze and code data analysis Generate theory Establish core categories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data analysis (Constant comparative method) Data coding and distillation (reduction) Categories, themes confirmed/ discounted More refined categories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> August 2012 – unstructured interviews RECs September 2012 – unstructured interviews Principals October/November 2012 – unstructured interviews CEO personnel 2013- Verification of data
FINAL ANALYSIS					
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write up analysis/discussion Final theorizing & Final report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparison made between all data collected throughout data gathering process. Analytical interpretation. Note core categories 	2013
Explore the leadership role of the REC in professional learning within Catholic primary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese					

Conclusion to the Chapter

This research endeavored to gain a more informed and sophisticated understanding of the leadership role of the REC in RE professional learning. As such, this study was concerned with the thoughts and actions of key stakeholders involved in this exploration namely classroom teachers, REC's, principals and relevant key CEO personnel. This chapter explained why the constructionism paradigm was appropriate to underpin this study. It highlighted how the theoretical perspective used to enable logical process for this research was interpretivism, as this approach assisted the researcher in understanding the nature of the participants' interactions with their school environments. Since this study focused on how participants defined their world and how that definition shaped their actions, the appropriateness of symbolic interactionism has been established. The most appropriate framework for this study of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning was focused on discovery, insight and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied, especially the REC and key stakeholders who influence their role. As the research purpose was theory generation, correspondingly the research methodology was GT. New insights and subsequent generation of theory in the study emerged through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A key concern of this thesis was to understand the phenomenon of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning, from the participants' perspective, *not* the researcher's.

In the following chapters the perspectives of the participants in this study are examined and discussed in more detail. As has been explained, tentative insights and emerging theory are proposed as further analysis is presented. Finally, consolidated theory is presented. The next chapter, Chapter four, presents the data generated in Stage one of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS- STAGE ONE

Introduction to the Chapter

Chapter three provided an outline of the research design and methodology, as well as the methods employed for data collection and analysis. This chapter begins the presentation and analysis of the data generated in stage one. It focuses on the first stage of the research – the anonymous on-line survey. This chapter discusses the data that was generated and identifies emergent themes which are organized responses from the classroom teachers and RECs who took part in the research. As discussed in the previous chapter, a GT approach was employed and this and the following chapters present the theory generated from the use of this methodology. Later chapters focus on the further stages of the research findings.

Stage One Findings

This chapter draws on the data generated in stage one. It presents initial findings and explores the mindset of RE practitioners in the context of Catholic primary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese with a focus on the question: “According to key stakeholders what models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools?” The overall purpose of the thesis was to illuminate and understand the lived experiences and perceptions of RE teachers, RECs and principals as they contended with professional learning and leadership issues within the Catholic primary school context. So whilst the data generated for this stage indicated the perceptions of professional learning for religious educators and RECs, the researcher also sought to better understand these perceptions, expectations and experiences of professional learning in RE. The initial findings were gained by a method specific technique, an anonymous, context specific online open-ended LIME survey. The justification for this method was established in the previous chapter. The major themes covered in the survey findings are now discussed and examined.

Classroom Participants

A total of 123 classroom teachers responded to the anonymous online survey and a further 14 participants partially responded to the electronic survey, meaning that they did not answer all survey questions. The richness of some of these partial responses and their direct relevance to the research question meant these partial responses warranted due consideration. Consequently, some of these incomplete responses have been included in this chapter. The responses provided a valuable window from which to consider some key elements and conditions disclosed as fundamental to professional learning for religious educators. Overall the volunteer response rate indicated a comprehensive interest in this study demonstrated by willingness to commit to undertaking the anonymous survey. *Figure 4:1.* summarizes the range of teaching experience of the primary RE classroom teachers from the Melbourne archdiocese who responded to the survey.

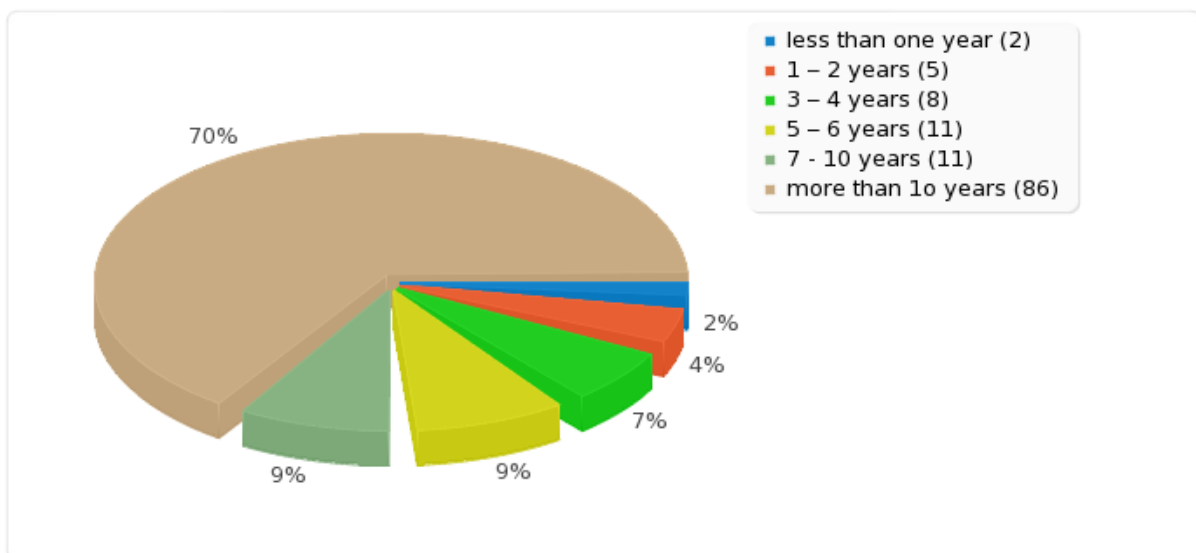


Figure 4:1. Classroom teachers' year of experience teaching RE.

It is clear that, whilst the participants had a wide range of experience in teaching RE, predominantly this experience was over ten years. However, it was also valuable to gain perspectives from a range of classroom RE educators with more limited experience. Respondents in the infancy of their teaching career as religious educators, (i.e. graduate teachers), as well as those with numerous years experience (ten or more), were needed to provide diversity in teacher characteristics, capabilities and sense of personal agency. The

different needs expressed by these respondents at various stages of their career are noted in more detail as the findings are presented in this section.

Figure 4:2. presented next demonstrates the year levels of the respondents teaching RE.

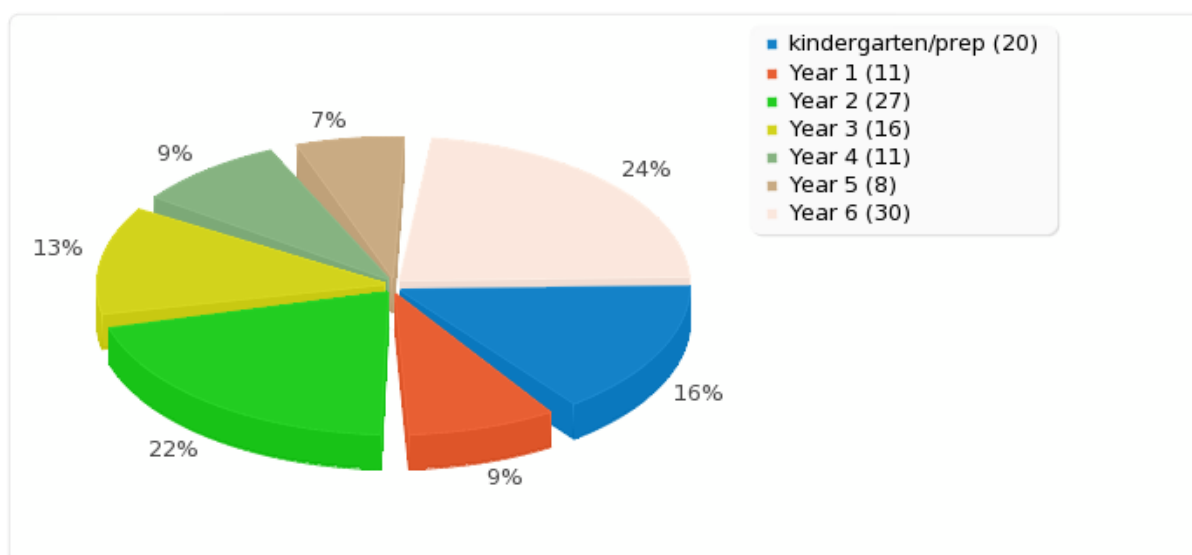


Figure 4:2. Classroom teachers' years level in teaching RE.

Figure 4:2. illustrates that there was an acceptable spread of respondents at each level of the school, making it possible to gain different perspectives from the junior, middle and senior RE classroom teachers. Although more responses were received from the junior level, (58) as opposed to the middle level, (27) and senior level, (38) this can be attributed to the fact that the junior level in the Victorian primary context, includes three grade levels (Prep, Year one and Year two) and the middle and senior levels contain only two year levels.

The findings from stage one are discussed by focusing on classroom teachers' perceptions, experiences and observations about professional learning and then moving onto RECs' perspectives. In order to help provide a clearer picture of the respondents' views and perceptions, emerging categories are presented and explored in relation to both the years of experience and year level at which the teachers operated.

The first section provided insights into the "what" of RE professional learning and asked respondents to consider the professional learning they needed as religious educators. When responding to the question "What professional learning do you need to develop as a RE teacher?" a broad a range of responses resulted, however, there were clear, dominant and

recurring themes. These emerging categories and sub categories/properties are initially presented in Table 4.1. in decreasing order of frequency, then the data are interpreted in more detail.

Table 4.1.
Summary of emerging categories of Professional Learning needs of religious educators

Category	Sub Category	Junior	Middle	Senior	Total
Enhancing teacher pedagogical knowledge					
	Contemporary best practice RE teaching strategies	22	3	11	36
	Student Engagement	6	5	8	19
	Good Shepherd/Godly Play	12	2	1	15
	Curriculum CTKWL/MJR	2		12	14
	Assessment and reporting	6	3	4	13
	Critical/Reflective thinking strategies	4	1		5
	Inquiry learning	2	1	1	4
Enhancing teacher content knowledge					
	Catholic doctrine, beliefs practices, traditions	9	8	13	30
	Scripture	7	11	10	28
	Mass/Prayer	7	1	3	11
	Sacraments	4	2	1	7
Enhancing Curriculum Supports					
	Resourcing	2	4	5	11
	ICT	1	2	2	5
	Multi faith			2	2
Enhancing professional partnerships					
	Accreditation	3		3	6
	Masters		1	2	3
	Grad Diploma/Post graduate	1	1	1	3

The data analysis revealed four key features of religious educators' professional learning needs which can complement and add to the current literature in this field⁵.

Category One: Enhancing Teacher Pedagogical Knowledge

The most frequent response concerned pedagogical knowledge. Whilst responses varied, improving teacher pedagogical knowledge was often articulated in relation to a variety of contemporary teaching/learning strategies in RE. Many respondents argued that professional learning in RE must be progressive and increase teachers' pedagogical knowledge based on what participants frequently described as contemporary best practice. This was typified by the comment from participant 101, "We need to be constantly learning and working with world's best practice". Arguably "best practice" is a phrase touted regularly in educational circles and is perhaps viewed as jargon, as it is questionable whether it is used correctly. In the survey responses, those who used this term did so in the context of discussing contemporary teaching and learning pedagogy. This assertion was exemplified by the comment from participant 101, "I need an understanding of how children learn best in RE". In a similar vein another participant 28 argued for "knowledge of teaching and learning and how to best teach RE within the classroom setting". Another participant, 102, asked for "professional learning in current trends in the most effective ways of teaching RE in the twenty-first century". Teachers wanted pedagogical knowledge, but it needed to be of the highest standard which indicated progressive pedagogical thinking and standards can be applied to RE.

Respondents at the junior level were specific about their teacher pedagogical knowledge needs and recognised both the particularities of their students and the particular pedagogy assigned to early years students in the Melbourne Archdiocese, namely, *The Good Shepherd Experience*. One participant (100) stated "I need to know/keep abreast of modern education and better understand how to engage students in the early years using contemporary pedagogical methods". Godly Play, an influence on early years learning, discussed earlier in Chapter one, was another common professional learning pedagogical

⁵ Sections of this chapter have been published.

Dowling, E. (2012). Effective Professional learning for religious educators: Some preliminary findings. *Journal of Religious Education*, 60(3), 54-66.

need expressed by teachers in the early years. At the senior level participant 8 claimed, “I believe all teachers of RE need to experience contemporary learning in order to engage the children through a range of new teaching styles”. This sentiment was echoed by participant 5, also working in the senior level, who responded “I would love to learn more about rich and engaging tasks that enable the students to be well informed”. These comments indicated that RE teachers understood the intricacies of teaching and learning at different levels of the school and valued the importance of instilling interest in each student in their RE class.

The need for teachers to know the content they teach, as well as knowing how students learn and how to teach them effectively is termed “*Pedagogical Content Knowledge*” (Hashweh, 2005; Schulman, 1987). “PCK has emerged in recent times as a powerful and insightful way of analysing and discussing how teachers think and make decisions about teaching” (McCaughy, 2005, p. 379). This conception of PCK relates to a teacher’s beliefs about content and subject matter as well as general pedagogical knowledge. Participant 13 explained “I need to know content to be taught and have good teaching practices like any other curriculum area”. The views of participant 131 were closely aligned as he/she stated a need for “innovative ways to present rich content”. The interconnectedness of knowing subject matter, pedagogy, curriculum and students was highlighted clearly by participant 28, who demonstrated an appreciation and application of this term in the RE context. He/she expressed a need for “A background in bible studies and the teachings of the Church as well as an understanding of how early years children learn best”. Participant 19 also validated this connection evidenced by the comments “I need further, more up to date background knowledge on current doctrine and expectations/ideas in regards to my teaching these to students”. The aforementioned thinking goes beyond just content knowledge and extends to knowing students and understanding the dynamics of PCK. The richness of these responses lies in the ways that the participant’s knowledge of students influences thinking about decisions about content. The view of what it means to RE content was integral to what it meant to teach RE with a focus on the particular ways young children learn. That is, the knowledge is used to transform subject matter content into forms more comprehensible to students. It seems that a good understanding of the key characteristics of students at each level has material implications for learning and teaching in RE. Further, the need to improve pedagogical knowledge is ongoing according to participant 117, “I am always searching for interesting and meaningful strategies and activities to help children grow in their religious understandings”.

It is apparent that some RE classroom teachers are noticing the shift in student population and recognise the growing religious diversity in Australian schools which was articulated in Chapter one. A particular reflection from participant 47 illuminated this perspective when he/she stated, "I need to know what to do/say in the classroom when not all your class is Catholic and no child's family goes to Mass on the week-end, we need to recognise student contexts, I want to make RE interesting and relevant in today's context". In addition, as has been identified in Chapter one of this thesis, it is necessary for teachers of RE to recognise the importance of being innovative and adaptable in order to meet the current and emerging local, national and international contexts. Different participants' comments highlighted the value of better understanding RE students and the context within which teachers teach. This is not simple. Participant 52 indicated that perhaps a new and improved approach to RE may be required: "We need to have a fresh look at WHAT we teach and HOW we teach it to enrich current programs".

Summary of this category

Schools and teachers need to plan and teach RE curriculum that best accommodates the interests, needs and abilities of their students within their learning context. Responses illustrated that professional learning can help achieve this. As with all other areas of the curriculum, the RE teacher is challenged to design classroom learning experiences that respect the integrity of the material to be explored, whilst being appropriate to the developmental level, prior learning, cultural experiences and other personal qualities of learners (CEOB, 2005; CEOM, 2008). Student diversity is a factor that influences the design and delivery of RE programs in Catholic schools. Given the range of subcategories which fall under the category of teacher pedagogical knowledge, it seems RE teachers respect the need to know and use flexible, innovative teaching approaches designed to respond to individual differences in students' needs, abilities, interests and learning styles.

Category Two: Enhancing Teacher Content Knowledge

The next most frequent response provided by classroom survey participants, although expressed differently, was categorized as *enhancing teacher content knowledge*. These responses indicated that professional learning helped RE teachers to be supported in the content knowledge they required in their role as classroom religious educators. Teacher content knowledge refers to the need for teachers to develop a competent level of content

knowledge specific to RE, and to feel confident in their own understandings of the various disciplines that underpin RE. This focus on content knowledge also provided insights into specific areas of content perceived as necessary for primary religious educators in the Melbourne context. Each sub-category indicated specific content knowledge, or was topic specific to the curriculum materials called CTKWL, *A Religious Education Curriculum Framework for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* as outlined in Chapter one. Not surprisingly an understanding of Church teachings including Catholic doctrines, beliefs and traditions was the most frequent response. However, other key foundational knowledge required in the teaching of RE was also proffered, such as Scripture, Liturgy and the Sacraments. These areas align well with the nominated key content areas of the CTKWL Framework, namely (a) Scripture and Jesus, (b) Church and community, (c) God Religion and Life, (d) Prayer, Liturgy and Sacraments, (e) Morality and Justice, which are pivotal in shaping classroom RE according to the Archdiocese of Melbourne. The sub categories illustrated that the reference point for RE content was knowledge and understanding of Christian revelation through the sources of Scripture and Tradition, and expressed in the faith of the Church. These subcategories also validated the contention that RE has its own distinct and specific body of knowledge.

Calls for greater levels of religious literacy of RE staff (Ryan, 2007; Rymarz, 2012) require teachers to be well versed in a number of religious disciplines and the survey responses confirmed this demand. In seeking to increase students' religious understandings, teachers must also seek to develop their own religious literacy. The importance of knowing the riches of the Christian tradition was exemplified by participant 10 who explained 'I can't teach what I can't explain'. RE teachers need to understand the unit of work they are developing for their students. The significance of teachers developing their content knowledge and the important filtering process that can result from this was described by participant 28 "The teacher develops their own personal understanding of religious education which is then expanded upon to teach more effectively in the classroom". These sentiments reflected an educational approach to RE espoused by numerous contemporary RE scholars (Rummary, 1977; Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; 1988; Moran, 2002), which emphasizes the quest for understanding of RE subject matter. This approach has slowly gained influence and acceptance in Australian Catholic school RE programs. In the current educational paradigm which has an emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, it seems fitting that respondents highlighted that a key focus of staff professional learning should enable RE teachers to

develop competencies to teach the content of the curriculum materials they must translate to the students in the RE classroom.

The key importance of teacher content knowledge and its implications was discussed by participant 43 who provided a perspective from the viewpoint of both a teacher of RE and a parent. The participant observed:

I have found that many teachers are not accredited to teach RE and have a broad time frame in which to commit to commencing an accredited course. If these teachers change schools, this time frame changes again. I don't expect teachers to be Catholic - the best religious education both my sons received was from an Anglican teacher. I do expect an adequate knowledge of doctrine.

Participant 50 with over ten years experience, spoke of “a clear understanding of the unit of work you are teaching” which suggested familiarity with core aspects of RE content is needed for RE teachers. Various participants within a broad spectrum of years provided comments to endorse this perspective. A new teacher with two years experience, participant 88, recognized individual limitations in terms of confidence and expertise and articulated a need to deepen teacher understanding before teaching units “I don’t feel adequate in my level of understanding at present”. The respondent went on to affirm the need and value of content knowledge and discussed the necessity to gain accreditation to teach RE in order to best teach RE to students in his/her care. Other teachers with less experience than five years also indicated a need to build on their rudimentary understandings. Their responses also verified a commitment to pursue accreditation as part of their professional learning needs. It appeared that primary RE teachers’ accreditation opportunities were viewed as a valid means to gain fundamental knowledge, skills and competencies to teach RE. By extending content knowledge and scholarship in RE educators are better placed to carry out advanced academic and professional learning directly relevant to their classroom professional responsibilities and concerns. This expressed gap in knowledge and need for basic support to extend the depth of a teacher’s content knowledge may logically also be an issue for graduate teachers, teachers not of a Catholic background/upbringing and those lacking formal RE training or qualifications. In fact the importance of increasing and effectively applying content knowledge at all stages of an RE teachers’ career was explained succinctly by participant 109:

Having just finished my Masters (degree) in religious education, it has made me realize how “unprepared” in a theological sense classroom teachers are in delivering

their lessons to their students. With the knowledge I have gained throughout my study, I use it in my lessons as much as possible and the children cheer and really look forward to the RE lessons. What does this tell you?

Whilst the survey data exposed gaps in the religious knowledge of some teachers, the need and concern for ongoing content knowledge, regardless of age and/or experience, was consistent with the necessity for LLL discussed in Chapter three. This sentiment was exemplified by participant 82, with more than ten years experience who revealed “a commitment to continuous content knowledge”. The importance of maintaining or refreshing content knowledge was modeled by participant 117 with over ten years experience, who declared:

I would like to continue deepening my own understandings even though I have recently completed my Masters (degree) in Religious Education. I believe professional development that shows the clear links between what activities are being proposed in planning and the teachings of Jesus and the church help teachers understand more fully what they are trying to achieve.

Various participants expressed a need to extend their knowledge and understanding of the content required for teaching RE but also clearly indicated that this content knowledge needed to be current and in line with modern day scholarship and Church teachings. This sentiment was encapsulated by participant 20 who responded: “We need to develop RE language and knowledge that is up to date and contemporary”. Likewise participant 19 suggested a need for “further, more up to date, background knowledge on current doctrine and expectations in regard to my teaching these to students”. The need for content knowledge that is level specific was illustrated by participant 15 who stated “I’ve only just moved grade levels and would love to learn more about developing the language and knowledge to facilitate learning in the upper year levels”. A key learning from these findings for those responsible for the quality of RE in Catholic primary schools is, that it is important to give voice to the experience of highly committed RE teachers, as much as it is to reflect on the practice of those RE teachers who may have difficulties with lack of content knowledge, yet who must teach RE in Catholic primary schools.

Along with a perceived need for current understandings was a need for a depth of RE content knowledge. It appeared that the degree of a teacher’s content knowledge was also crucial to how their teaching might be developed. Explaining this sentiment participant 80 claimed: “I need help to develop a deeper understanding of Catholic beliefs and traditions; I

need a depth of content knowledge”. He/she went further to explain, “I need to have more background knowledge, what I learnt as a child and teenager is not necessarily the right information.” Participant 81 with seven to ten years experience also noted how content/methods had changed in RE and the potential impact this has for teachers and students, when he/she declared their need for:

the understanding of doctrine and the enthusiasm to impart this understanding to our students. To understand the Church’s teaching today as compared to the way I was taught. To interpret the readings of the Bible as compared to the literal teachings we experienced.

What is being recognized in this and other comments is that lack of content or an outdated understanding of content may be detrimental and limit educational possibilities for RE teachers and students. Increased background reading or research into the content to be taught is particularly needed if teachers venture into unfamiliar territory. Whilst respondents had a diverse range of knowledge and appreciation of Catholic teachings, when respondents conceded little or no knowledge, some sought to address this inadequacy and viewed various channels of professional learning opportunities in RE as a valid means to improve or extend their own content knowledge.

The degree of rigor needed for teacher content knowledge was confirmed by participant 44’s response “You need a good solid contemporary knowledge of all areas of RE, especially the use of Scripture is important - analysing it, letting the student get to know it. Knowing it yourself first”. This and similar comments indicate that RE teachers at all levels appreciated the need and importance of having a clear current religious understanding of the content they present. These sentiments correlated with contemporary religious scholarship (Buchanan, 2010; Lacey, 2011; Lovat, 2009; Rymarz, 2012). These scholars insisted good RE teachers must be trained specialists and cannot ignore contemporary theological and Church teachings which provide the foundation for each unit of work to be presented to students. A solid understanding of background knowledge for teachers is not just important, it is essential for effective student learning in RE.

These initial findings clearly demonstrated that teachers of RE require professional competence in the aforementioned content areas. A range of literature supports the established belief that sustained deep professional content knowledge is needed in all academic areas. Further the data indicated that through all stages of their RE career, teachers

need a developed sense of confidence and understanding in all matters pertaining to the local diocesan content requirements. Prior research (Buchanan, 2007; Healy, 2011) has observed that some RE teachers lacked a depth of understanding in terms of knowledge about the Catholic faith tradition. By engaging with significant areas of study such as Scripture, Sacraments, Prayer and Liturgy, to name but a few, teachers can explore the ways in which these topics might be brought to life through vibrant teaching and learning situations. In line with other studies (Healy, 2011) this data suggested that increased competencies in religious knowledge must continue to be a main focus of professional learning in order to improve teacher practice and potentially enhance student learning in RE.

Some observations and comparisons of professional learning in RE in relation to other learning areas provided an insight into the relationship between the needs expressed in RE and the professional learning needs in other key learning areas. Participant 13 challenged: “It would be great to also have some refresher courses in RE, we constantly up date Maths and Literacy, but as for being contemporary in regards to religion very little is done”. This view observed that teacher professional learning in RE was perceived as not commensurate with other contemporary professional learning developments within the Catholic primary context and specific examples were named such as CTLM and Literacy. This sentiment was not an isolated comment as another participant 24 reflected “Teachers need to have regular PLTs in RE the same as we do in Maths and Literacy”. The extent of this issue and the frustration it caused was acknowledged by participant 117 who lamented the lack of:

An opportunity for teachers in classrooms to have much more PD. It is very lacking and falls far behind the push for Maths or Literacy and so in the eyes of many it comes in way down the list because these other subjects are given a huge amount of PD and religious education is just something you get to if you have the time. Heart breaking in a Catholic school system.

The need to give both time and priority to professional learning in RE was captured when classroom teacher, participant 19, reflected on his/her experiences “It has been a long time (when I was at uni) since I have done any real 'study' into pertinent issues in RE or how to effectively teach RE”.

This perceived lack of recognition by some classroom practitioners of the need and importance of RE professional learning, was in stark contrast to evidence presented in Chapter one (within official Church documents, CEOM strategic plan, and local Catholic SIP

and websites) which claimed that RE staff in Catholic schools are encouraged to engage in professional learning, always seeking innovative ways to improve their practice. If continuing professional learning is viewed as an essential component of school improvement and staff professional learning, then these comments highlight an anomaly between what is espoused in official Church, system and school documentation and the realities which occur in the local settings of Catholic primary schools. Such a finding suggests the ideal, often expressed through the rhetoric of written documents is open to challenge based on the reality faced by schools.

The perceived lack of importance and recognition noted by some participants affects the quality and status of professional learning in RE. In addition the professionalism of RE teachers and the integrity of RE as a school discipline are also threatened by criticisms such as these. Participant 120, with six years experience, revealed the extent of this problem “This is the first year I am doing any professional learning in RE and I’m really looking forward to it”. Participant 6 reiterated this contention and claimed “I have not had much professional learning in the Religious Education area”. The following extract from participant 72 reflected a perception of the challenges generated by the nature and depth of RE professional learning. He/she claimed, “In my experience it is very ad hoc and non-strategic in the way it is presented if at all”.

To discuss the nature, extent and limits of these perceptions lies beyond the scope of present considerations. However there appears to be a need to investigate further and eliminate the wide disparity between how professional learning is situated in RE compared with other key learning areas. Although mounting voices in the Australian context have recognised the need to support religious teachers’ lifelong learning opportunities (Dowling, 2012; Harvey, 2009; Healy, 2011) it was apparent that a priority for professional learning is one thing to assert and another to enact. However, whilst lamenting this issue, participant 20 provided some hope for the future of professional learning in RE: “Unfortunately it can take a back seat to other curriculum areas with PD, but the new changes to Mass responses may bring it to the forefront as a focus”. When articulating the “changes to Mass responses” this respondent was referring to the new mandated translation of the Mass that more faithfully tracks the original Latin. This participant recognised that this “outside” influence occurring within the wider RE context may be a legitimate and relevant stimulus for increased professional learning in RE.

Summary of this category

The findings in this category suggest that subject matter knowledge was highly valued by participants to provide the necessary specialisation skills needed to teach RE effectively. Yet this alone is not enough. Whilst some participants prized opportunities to extend or master the knowledge content about a specific unit of work to be studied in RE, as the responses classified in category one have demonstrated, respondents also spoke highly of a better understanding of the pedagogy required to effectively implement the content into the RE curriculum. That is RE teachers expressed a need for content knowledge of Church Tradition, Scripture, Prayer, Liturgy and Sacraments coupled with applying principles of RE to *teaching* Church Tradition, Scripture, Prayer, Liturgy and Sacraments. Therefore, it is best to view category one and two as complementary to each other. Of further significance was the repeated request from RE teachers that any professional learning endeavours should be as rigorous and equivalent to other key learning domains within a school.

Category Three: Enhancing Curriculum Supports

Just as respondents identified a need for contemporary and innovative pedagogical ideas, this sentiment was also expressed in relation to a call for professional learning about a range of contemporary curriculum resources and tools. An example of this need was articulated by a year three teacher, participant 94, who requested “knowledge of resources in different media”. A year four teacher, participant 65, spoke of “how to quickly find a variety of engaging resources for the students to work with” and also requested “use of art works to explore the messages or teaching I am trying to convey”. These perspectives revealed that participants saw value in learning about new RE resources/media that would ultimately enhance their RE curriculum and teaching. The benefit of learning about resources for students was explored by a prep teacher, participant 113, who requested “ideas and resources to stimulate student involvement and learning.” He/she also added a caveat “TIME to look at these or see them being used effectively. A year three teacher, participant 60, spoke of “learning about interactive whiteboard, songs, books and posters to engage students”. He/she likewise expressed the importance of “having the time to try out new things, having the time to explore and experiment with the resources, do what has to be done in an unhurried way”.

Together with a concern for time to experiment and learn more about the curriculum supports, was a concern for resourcing to be contemporary and of a high quality. Participant

105 expressed this clearly, “I think we need to become more up to date with some of our books and videos”. Participant 47 stated, “I need good resources that are suitable for use in the classroom”. Further, participant 129 stated, “Coming back into teaching from a break, I need professional learning on the resources, innovative new, modern resources”. For RE teachers new to the classroom/school and for those returning to the classroom after an extended break consideration given to exploring curriculum supports or perhaps a refresher course in curriculum supports may alleviate these issues noted by survey participants.

There was a clear and consistent message given by all year levels which indicated a need for professional learning to use and access online curriculum support materials. However, mixed reviews about the Information Communication Technology (ICT) component make this data worthy of further investigation. Participant 69, a year six teacher, stated that “Any professional learning that is focused on using technology to teach RE is always helpful”. However he/she also expressed a concern that “RE needs to continue to move forward with all other areas of the curriculum especially in the area of technology so it does not get left behind”. Interestingly, further congruence was demonstrated by a teacher in the junior school, a year one teacher, participant 32, who echoed some perceived deficiencies in this area when he/she claimed “I have not found many ICT RE resources - I wonder if there is a shortage in this area”. An important finding is the need to not only incorporate ICT into RE professional learning experiences but also to ensure that this is at least commensurate to the good practice which occurs in other learning areas.

Summary of this category

The data generated in this category suggested that teachers appreciated the opportunity to engage with innovative RE resources and viewed this as an occasion to enhance their classroom teaching practice or to better address student needs. RE teachers wanted curriculum supports that can be harnessed to improve pedagogy and student learning. ICT was espoused as an important curriculum resource although some data indicated deficiencies and challenges which need to be addressed. The responses also underscored that the effective use of any of the nominated resources, is dependent on time for exploration and experimentation in order to effectively critique the potential and suitability of the resources for RE teachers’ specific classroom context and needs.

Category Four: Enhancing Professional Learning Partnerships.

The next theme that emerged from the data in this first stage, was the notion that professional learning in RE could develop and enhance professional partnerships with other stakeholders. Respondents identified a variety of ways that professional learning could enhance their RE teaching and increase their professionalism. Survey participants also cited numerous ways this might be achieved.

Some classroom teachers valued professional learning support in RE achieved through formal academic study, as well as professional learning via the system or the central level as is indicated in the sub categories. One participant, participant 21, stated: “I need some academic studies, qualification and ongoing PD”. Another participant, participant 23, explained “I believe through recent study my needs have been met. What helped me to develop was studying biblical studies during my Grad course”. Participant 58 concurred, “A Grad Dip in RE would be good”. According to various participants a Graduate Certificate RE/Graduate Diploma RE can provide a relevant and challenging initial qualification for teachers wanting to teach RE. A rationale for this attention to accreditation is expressed in the NCEC overview of Diocesan policies on Accreditation to teach in Catholic Schools. They express the “expectation that teachers in Catholic schools will have the necessary knowledge of and commitment to the Church’s teachings and an understanding of the ethos of the Catholic School” (NCEC, 2005, p. 1).

Classroom participants’ statements provided a picture of how RE professional learning needs for some, may be met through academic agencies including further theological studies and/or universities courses. The following response from participant 87 indicated that there is a range of avenues to do this:

I have been undertaking RE PD regularly - there is a lot on offer through CEOM, ACU, JP II Institute, etc. and local CEO Regions and Networks. CEOM also offers excellent study sponsorship in the area. I sincerely believe PD offered is very adequate- if people can’t find it they aren’t looking.

This sentiment was not unanimous. A note of caution was sounded by participant 50 who commented: “There is little professional development offered in RE. This is sad especially as most people find it difficult to teach”. Perhaps the response from participant 50 can be explained by a communication problem particular to his/her school whereby for some reason,

relevant professional learning information does not get through to classroom teachers. The wide disparity in perceptions identified here challenges school communities to ensure that RE professional learning information/opportunities are consistently and readily made available to all RE staff. Where this is not the case, schools must reflect why this is not occurring and decide how to best alleviate this problem for RE staff.

While some respondents provided positive evidence of partnerships between schools and universities, of further interest were the challenges identified by participants when engaging in these partnerships, including time, funding and in some cases stress associated with formal tertiary learning. Compounding these considerations, other participants were highly critical when they reflected on their professional learning partnerships at tertiary institutions and indicated the knowledge gained needed to be more practical as is illustrated by the following comment:

I did not learn anything of use at uni, as I am currently completing the Graduate Certificate of RE; I feel the course would be better if it were directed more at teaching rather than academic content. It has not equipped me enough to teach Prep/1 students in an effective way (Participant 100).

Participant 10 reiterated this viewpoint, “I attended a uni course and unfortunately it provided very little practical advice”. This experience was a direct contradiction to the expressed accreditation needs of participants outlined earlier in this chapter in category two. The critical comments about the nature and practical application of the courses at University may be well founded or may not; however this is not within the scope of this thesis. Given that the selections of units and topics which make up university courses deal with fundamental issues of teaching and learning within RE, these complaints indicated a need to incorporate greater attention to the educational dimensions of the various disciplines in the units comprising these awards. Closer scrutiny of all new and existing tertiary units may ensure that the accreditation courses are of a high standard and meet the expressed needs of the classroom RE teachers as student participants. A review, at appropriate intervals, should be approached in a manner which enables teachers to see the ways in which RE is fundamental to teaching and learning and broaden teachers’ understandings of what it means to be an educator, in particular a religious educator.

Undoubtedly the finding to provide more opportunities for practical learning could be accommodated with some minor fine tuning of the courses and its unit offerings. However, as

Catholic classroom teachers are key stakeholders in the enterprise of RE, these multiple claims validated the need to seriously critique, review and strengthen accreditation arrangements and requirements. Any partnerships established between ACU and CEOs need to include feedback from RE teachers as part of any course reviews. Ongoing collaboration with RE classroom teachers will be necessary to ensure that they participate actively in the reshaping and reforming of their work in contemporary Australian Catholic primary schools.

Participant 88, who noted the deficiencies of tertiary learning, pointed towards another approach viewed as viable which was collaborative, school based professional learning which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

I found the RE that I did at ACU did not prepare me for teaching, the historical context was so far removed from what we teach. I required how to plan a Mass, what resources are best, more practical. It is about getting in and working in a school, that is your best professional development and planning and learning with each other.

These scenarios serve as brief examples, but point towards the conclusion that outside agencies used for professional learning have not proved to be a panacea, and it would be foolish to rely on this form of professional learning meeting the needs of all RE educators. Further, finding a balance between school-based and external PD can be problematic according to participant 64, “I have only participated in school professional development such as religious focus curriculum days, so PD sourced from outside the school environment would be beneficial”.

Professional partnerships outside of the school were viewed more favourably if the theory explored included a practical component. A need to complement these partnerships with ongoing school based learning was also noted. Much educational literature has illustrated that a great deal of untapped knowledge about teaching and learning resides within the school itself (Killion & Harrison, 2006; Victorian Government report, 2008). This argument has been confirmed in two recent studies of professional learning in RE conducted in the primary context of Catholic schools in Tasmanian (Harvey 2009; Healy, 2011) and this study in the Melbourne context appears at this stage to mirror these studies.

Summary of this category

Participants viewed opportunities to work with others to improve their professionalism in RE as valuable. Conversely they noted that there are some difficulties, real or perceived with

some of these learning partnerships. Whilst both positive and negative experiences were expressed, the constraints provided valuable insights into how to address and improve these relationships in the future. The findings confirmed the importance of regular consultation with classroom RE teachers who are presently studying RE, and with other key stakeholders such as relevant Catholic education authorities across the state to ensure that the Graduate Certificate RE/Graduate Diploma RE meets RE classroom teachers expressed needs. Ongoing evaluation of these partnerships and closer collaboration between organisers and participants may help to overcome some of the perceived problems identified in this data.

RE Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Professional Learning.

This following section of the chapter introduces considerations about providing effective teacher professional learning in RE. In essence it deals with the “how” of professional learning and identifies teacher preferences in relation to the purpose, mode and delivery of professional learning in RE. Findings reiterated the pragmatic nature of classroom teachers (Loughran, 2010) and comments to confirm this assumption are provided. As has been alluded to earlier, the most frequent responses indicated discussion about and development in technical and practical aspects of RE teaching. The most focal points from this data indicated that effective professional learning in RE needs a clear purpose where the learning that takes place is intentional and is linked to the ongoing work of teacher educators. The next categories illustrated that the design of professional learning should value the social component. This would enable participants to learn for understanding, where participants can collaboratively connect information made available and make sense of it in ways that are relevant to participants and connect to the classroom. The subsequent category related to the contextual conditions for professional learning and indicated a clear preference for school based learning. The last category identified the relational aspects of professional learning.

Table 4.2. which follows, illustrates key factors revealed as elements of effective professional learning for classroom participants. Table 4.2. is again presented in decreasing order of frequency.

Table 4.2.
Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Professional Learning

Category	Sub category	Emerging Theory	Sample participant comment
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merge theory and practice • Improve teaching strategies • Improve teachers professionalism/ accountability • Improve student learning 	The design of activities and the reason for teachers undertaking these activities must be practical and directly linked to classroom teaching and student learning.	<i>"Anything directly connected to classroom (student learning) learning foci, focusing on teaching strategies, standards, content knowledge and assessment, action plan learning is all good "</i>
Organisational elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collegial • Practical (hands on/workshops) • Inquiry based • Personal 	The structure of professional learning needs to incorporate a relational and applied method which values a collaborative and inquiry approach to learning.	<i>"Must be hands on workshops which provide opportunities to have effective strategies modelled practised, discussed and evaluated"</i>
Contextual Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level/Team based • REC • Whole School based • Inter school exchange • Outside agencies 	An emphasis on ongoing school based learning can help the RE teacher to focus and embed new knowledge and skills in RE.	<i>"It is through school based learning that my needs are met "</i>
Relational elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledgeable • Expertise/ credibility • Rapport 	Those facilitating RE professional learning need to be viewed as highly professional and should establish a personal rapport with participants.	<i>"need a good and practical presenter "</i>

Category One: Purpose.

The reason behind professional learning initiatives in RE was seen as critical to its effectiveness. Participants were consistent in their requests for professional learning that was immediately relevant and transferable to the classroom. Participant 42 captured the need to link theory and practice when he/she stated:

The PD offered by the CEO on the Good Shepherd Experience was very valuable because it consisted of whole day PD with a break between dates to try some of the strategies and report back to the whole group. Hearing how each school has trialled the strategies was excellent- if they could do it so could we

This participant acknowledged that RE teachers have a great deal of accumulated experience that is relevant to others and this sharing and trialling of strategies can enrich the RE professional learning experience, especially if the learning was ongoing and extended. This comment suggested that RE teachers themselves are both valuable sources and inspiration for RE professional learning. Encouraging and enabling an environment where RE teachers can support each other and receive feedback from their peers, was a source of motivation for RE teachers to transfer their professional learning back into their own RE classrooms. Multiple opportunities for teachers to learn and apply new knowledge were favourably received by classroom teachers.

Responses also indicated that the respondents wanted professional learning that respects and engages teachers in the quest to improve learning. According to participants, professional learning should encourage classroom teachers to demonstrate values, knowledge, skills and attitudes which have an impact on teaching practice and student learning. Participant 34 explained the nexus between theory and practice when they requested “a balance of theory to inform my professional learning as well as hands on activities that I can try with my students”. This balance can be achieved in many ways and participant 37 identified this in terms of what is commonly referred to as *inquiry or action research*, explaining “Watching and trying out ideas and techniques, seeing best practice in action and how we can bring RE alive for our students”.

Action research, where teachers reflect on their practice then act on this reflection act has been advocated as an effective model for teachers to utilise in their classrooms (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988; Robinson & Lai, 2006). The guiding principles of the action research model – plan, act, observe, reflect, revise, plan was evident

in participants' responses. Also important was the opportunity to review and discuss the new learnings exemplified by participant 46, "collaborative learning, trialling others' ideas in my own classroom and reflecting on these practices". Respondents identified opportunities to challenge, question, trial and reflect. This can be empowering and the importance of reflection is noted in more depth later in this chapter. Literature (Sparks, 2007) also confirmed the potential benefits of action learning to teachers' understanding and organisation of their teaching practices.

Professional learning which recognised the needs within the actual RE classroom and the core business of student learning was considered to be an important form of capacity building, and was perceived by teachers themselves to be a necessary extension of their teaching and of their work with students. Participant 69 explained: "I find it most effective when I am given ideas and lessons that can be used in the classroom straightaway". Participant 21 reflected this sentiment more directly "Good teachers always look for new ideas and approaches to bring to the classroom, just give us the best tools to help students learn". These teachers' reflections are well supported by numerous reports on professional learning in Australia and overseas which highlight the importance of professional learning responding to teachers' ongoing classroom responsibilities (Doecke, Parr & North, 2008.)

Stage one data showed there was a wide appreciation at all levels of the school, that if professional learning was explicitly embedded within teacher's work then there could be direct benefits to assist teachers to be more accountable, to both their professional needs and their commitment to student learning. This perspective situates teachers as an important catalyst in student learning (Ingvason, 2005; Rowe, 2007) and supported the contention that professional learning undertaken in isolation from teachers' ongoing classroom responsibilities may have little impact on teaching practice and student learning (Collopy, 2003; Fullan, 2005). However, whilst there appeared to be a growing respect for the practical component of professional learning and the potential of this model to support teachers' classroom practice, there was also evidence of room for development. This was highlighted by participant 41 who claimed "Not enough professional development is available for teachers about teaching RE in the classroom - its practical use and application".

Summary of this category

Teachers need to see the value of professional learning for their personal teaching practice. RE teachers learn best when what they are taught is perceived as useful and practical to the

RE classroom. The data repeatedly endorsed an approach to professional learning which allowed immediate applicability. This finding extends a challenge to those who offer professional learning opportunities to RE teachers. They should recognise the need to tailor professional learning in RE as a productive interface between teachers' needs and the RE classroom. It was clear that RE teachers respected and positively responded to professional learning opportunities that linked to their own practice and to the students.

Category Two: Organizational elements

RE teachers expressed a clear preference for professional learning activities that were organized to reflect a combination of theoretical and practical learning. Participant 101 stipulated that professional learning must "be hands on workshops which provide opportunities to have effective strategies modelled, practised, discussed and evaluated". Likewise participant 117 stated:

I think for most teachers that I work with the 'hands on ' approach is best as they are able to move away and actually incorporate something they have worked through or helped to create within their own classroom. They say this makes them feel supported and on the right track.

These responses also implied that this learning was arranged in an environment that allows for mutual cooperation and co-learning. So whilst there was a diversity of approaches and models proffered which focused on and embedded teacher practice, it was interesting to note that a common factor was the need to develop this within a collaborative culture. An opportunity to process new learning with others was explained by participant 22 where collaboration was enacted through "wondering, talking, investigating and responding with colleagues".

As has been previously noted in category one, various responses valued participation in action research where reflection is a critical component. Reflection and the promotion of reflective practices have become popular features of educational programmes. Since Dewey (1933) expressed an early view that "while we cannot learn or be taught to think we do have to learn how to think well, especially acquire the general habit of reflecting", various scholars have emphasised the importance of reflection (Freire, 1973; Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1987). They argued that as learners people are constantly constructing, revising, and reconstructing knowledge and beliefs to create a new framework of understanding. Reflection is the engine that drives this process. Interestingly more current research (Stoll, 2010; Timperley, 2010) demonstrated that improved student learning has been identified in schools where teachers

work in professional learning communities and are involved in reflective practice. The data in this category reiterated that various RE classroom participants were sympathetic to the focus on learning through experience in reflective practice. They provided evidence that they were committed to professional learning opportunities which permitted time for collaborative dialogue with other teachers to stimulate interest, reflection and practical inquiry. Participant 63 reinforced the value of “sharing of ideas, I enjoy hearing from other teachers and leaders about what works and best practices”. Professional dialogue encouraged teachers to form informal professional networks which assisted with professional practice and also took teachers out of the confines of their classroom.

The importance of being practical and collaborative was spelt out by participant 19 as “working and learning with others. I need some background theory then practical examples of how to plan and implement it in the classroom, e.g. how to more efficiently monitor and assess”. This response reinforced that of participant 88 highlighted earlier in this chapter, “It is about getting in and working in a school, that is your best professional development and planning and learning with each other”. This reiterated the claims in the literature that effective professional learning is strongly enhanced through collaborative learning and joint practice development (Sebba, Kent & Tregenza, 2012) In addition to the need for collaboration were multiple requests that the professional learning be ongoing (participants 36, 47, 85 & 102).

In stark contrast to the repeated need for collaborative professional learning practices one participant, 15 claimed: “I prefer personal research and exploration of online resources and readings, however, I also sometimes enjoy hearing from other teachers and leaders about what works and best practices”. This provided evidence that for RE teachers isolation continues to be a subject of concern.

Summary of this category

The perspectives presented provide a snap shot of the organisational elements of RE professional learning, however, a preference was widely expressed for a collaborative, ongoing, practical based learning often defined as inquiry based, action orientated learning. The responses demonstrated the value of opportunities which allow RE teachers to learn and apply knowledge, skills and understandings gained from professional learning to the RE classroom. The data suggested classroom teachers can address their learning needs in the

context of classroom practice through collaborative practices involving reflection and feedback. Teachers also recognised the strong social component and synergy that can result.

Category Three: Contextual conditions

The context (environment) where RE professional learning was offered makes a difference to the perceived effectiveness or otherwise of the experience. The school was viewed as the most popular context for professional learning to occur. The growth of interest in work place learning (i.e., school based) has resulted in a richer, more holistic view of the adult learner (Merriam, 2008). School based learning ranged from whole school PD days, staff meetings and in-services, to regular team/level meetings and planning opportunities with the REC. A preference for team/level planning was evident in the data demonstrated by participant 20: “level planning is a great way to bounce ideas and knowledge off each other”. Participant 119 affirmed this and liked to “work in professional learning teams to discuss programs and resources and share expertise within the group”. The penchant for group/team interactions was closely followed by opportunities to plan, reflect and evaluate together with the REC. Participants praised opportunities to plan directly with the REC as this provided direct and individual feedback to help improve RE classroom practice. Participant 130 described this context as “an open forum for discussion about RE curriculum”. Another response from participant 3 called for “opportunities to ask questions and not feel like we are supposed to know all the answers”.

Some professional learning which occurred in teams made RE staff more accountable as members are “working with colleagues, using work samples and planning documents together”(participant 16). He/she clarified that team learning was “continuous professional learning that is based on developing assessment tasks that help to identify areas for further learning”. Notions of group accountability and team/group leaning connected to real classroom issues like assessment, were positive examples of how RE professional learning can be directly transferred to the RE classroom.

Collaborative team learning provided a forum to work with other key stakeholders in RE as noted in the following comments from participant 118: “working in a team, sharing ideas and expertise, working closely with the parish priest during sacramental programs, learning from him during parent formation/information nights”. Participant 10 noted that working with the parish priest is not necessarily a common occurrence “We have a wonderful priest and he is extremely helpful but not all schools have this luxury”. Whilst participants

valued input from other relevant and local stakeholders, this was viewed as an additional bonus rather than the norm. Interestingly two responses (participants 27 & 94) also valued planning and learning with members of the leadership team. The inclusion of key RE leadership stakeholders being directly involved in classroom RE planning demonstrates a genuine interest and strong commitment to support RE classroom teachers and student learning.

Summary of this category

School based learning was overwhelmingly the preferred context for learning and enabled opportunities for classroom teachers to engage meaningfully with each other. In some schools this learning included key stakeholders in RE, including PPs, RECs and members of school leadership teams. The unity and strength of this model has great potential to be examined further. “Outside” facilitators was the least preferred option.

Category Four: Relational elements

Although very few responses reported a desire for external facilitators, when participants did refer to them, their expectations were justifiably elevated. Responses indicated that the person needed to be credible, confident and able to demonstrate expertise and experience in the primary context. An example of these demands was articulated by participant 11 who wanted “stimulating lectures/input by knowledgeable and down to earth speakers”. Another participant, 102, suggested an external expert should be “approachable and knowledgeable is a bonus to make further gains in your own ability and confident to teach RE”. In addition to these requests was a requirement for them to be stimulating, as one participant, 107, claimed “Haven’t yet found any that are not boring”.

Summary of this category

Although few responses cited outside facilitators, the limited responses implied that the facilitators of professional learning were held in high regard only if they demonstrated expertise and experience and could develop rapport with participants. RE teachers were responsive to facilitators who demonstrated proficiency and understood their needs as learners.

Preliminary Findings- RECs/Leadership/Professional learning

Whilst it was not the intention to gain specific insights into the RECs leadership role in stage one, additional optional comments made by some classroom teacher respondents demonstrated polarised viewpoints of the leadership role of the REC in the Catholic primary context. An examination of these comments provided valuable insights to better understand the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of some leadership models. This is verified in Table 4.3. *Perceived success according to RE classroom teachers.* These views recognised that whilst some good practice already exists in school settings, there is a real concern to extend and improve the relationship between classroom teachers, RECs and professional learning.

Table 4.3.
Perceived Success according to RE classroom teachers.

Success	Implications
“REC planning with us is important” (22). “More release time with the REC to plan and reflect on RE units” (83).	There are perceived benefits from having RECs take the lead in unit planning. This enables opportunities to share and monitor the success and challenges of classroom RE practices. Where this is occurring successfully, RE classroom teachers want to extend these opportunities.
“I am happy with how it (professional learning) is conducted through my school, we have been lucky enough to have some wonderful and regular pd that has really helped us” (35). “Collaborative learning practices seem to be working at our school” (113).	Teachers responded positively to ongoing opportunities to work collaboratively with guidance/expertise from a leader. Responses named RECs/PPs and leadership teams as people whose support was able to be integrated into the RE classroom.

Whilst there was evidence of the value of the RECs involvement directly in staff professional learning and an acknowledgement of the benefits for staff, paradoxically there were perceived deficiencies with the manner and personnel involved with professional learning.

This is demonstrated in Table 4.4. *Perceived Challenges according to RE classroom teachers.*

Table 4.4.
Perceived Challenges according to RE classroom teachers.

Challenges	Implications
“RECs have been to pd about the new texts - KWL but it's the classroom teachers that need to be shown how to implement them and the richness in them” (9).	Some classroom teachers resent the lack of opportunities for them to engage directly with professional learning opportunities. This may cause frustration to those at the coal face of RE teaching who wish to engage more directly with the RE curriculum.
“There needs to be more whole school pd's from CEOM rather than just REC based. These could be on reporting, planning etc.”(7). “It is an area where there is not much PD given to classroom teachers in our school, more the REC that attends” (21).	Extending the professional learning opportunities of RECs exclusively has been viewed at the expense of classroom teachers and the value of transferring these learnings offered to RECs may be highly dependent on the skills, confidence and expertise of the REC in their leadership role.
“It would be great to see CEO recognise the role of the RE leader through providing funding to release them from the classroom in order to give them the time to plan consistently with teaching teams, team teach in grades, organise all the liturgy, sacraments and most importantly build the Catholic identity of the school in which they are in” (97). “RECs should be given weekly “in school” time with classroom teachers to plan the RE units” (103).	To enable the REC to effectively function in their leadership role consideration must be given to structures, funding and time. These investments can support RE teachers as they strive towards the achievement of improved learning goals for their RE students.

This range of responses demonstrated that from the perspective of classroom teachers, it is uncertain whether or not the leadership role of the REC is optimised in the professional learning of staff. Some viewed planning with the REC positively and recognised the significance of opportunities for the REC to lead and support the classroom teacher who, in turn, may become better equipped to teach RE well. However, in contradiction, various others indicated that RECs’ participation in professional learning experiences were not necessarily translated back to the school for classroom teachers. No clear explanation was proposed for these different perceptions and some caution is needed in interpreting these comments from the RE classroom teachers. Nonetheless, what has become increasingly clear is that the ambiguity in regard to the RECs leadership role needs to be rectified. Further data is needed to consider the extent to which the negative perspectives forwarded by some

classroom teachers are valid. There is evidence that giving RECs time outside their school for their own professional learning, does not mean that the time is used in productive ways to enhance staff learning back at school. Without some local accountability, direction or opportunities to pass on this professional learning, there may be an inevitable tension between those who attended the professional learning and those, who by remaining at school, may be neglected/restricted in their professional learning needs.

Despite this, some comments suggested that it is necessary to be optimistic about leadership influence of the REC in professional learning and to consider the extent that this can be continued and the supports necessary to achieve this goal. There is some potential for professional learning organisers and school leaders to counter, or at least draw attention to, particular ways to encourage and support RECs after they have completed off site professional learning. To that end, some RECs as leaders, must take personal responsibility for their reluctance to seize the opportunities given to them and explore ways to create a learning environment back at school to support RE teachers. Whilst it has been identified that the school and RECs can help alleviate the leadership inconsistencies noted by classroom teachers, perhaps too the central system needs to be mindful that some forms of professional learning addressed only to RECs may in fact operate precisely to limit possibilities for the transmission of professional learning. Consequently perhaps, both systems and school leaders should work in partnership to be more sensitive to whether outside professional learning is transferred to the local school context.

Summary of Stage One Findings from Classroom Religious Educators

From a broad sample, the key needs of primary RE educators have been identified. It is clear that effective professional learning enhances teachers' pedagogy, content knowledge, curriculum supports and professional partnerships. These are all important to the professional growth of the religious educator and contribute to building the capacity of the RE teacher to deliver high quality learning to students. These categories affirm the extract from the CCE (1988) which stipulated "Everything possible should be done to ensure that Catholic primary schools have adequately trained teachers; it is a fundamental necessity and a legitimate expectation" (n. 96-97).

The key elements and conditions that influence effective professional learning for religious educators have been discussed. The purpose, organization and context of professional learning are essential considerations for RE teachers. The previous discussion has illustrated the interconnection of these categories, which appear to be interrelated and bound by the many different relationships that exist both within and outside of the Catholic primary school context. Overwhelmingly, responses indicated that practical, collaborative ongoing professional learning directly linked to the classroom were at the forefront of many RE teachers' professional learning needs.

The next sections of this chapter discuss the electronic survey finding from RECs in stage one, which provided an opportunity for interested RECs to express confidentially their views and opportunities for leadership of professional learning in RE. The discussion identifies and interprets what RECs view as key issues and cross references this data with feedback from RE classroom teachers to identify areas of consensus and divergence.

REC Participants

A total of 50 RECs were invited to complete this anonymous online survey. Fifteen RECs responded and as had occurred with the electronic survey for classroom teachers, four partially completed the electronic survey. Again some of these partial responses are included in the findings of this chapter, as they help to illuminate the overarching question of this study. RECs needed to have at least five years experience as RECs to be eligible to participate in this survey in order to ensure that the interested participants were most likely to be information rich with respect to the issues of central importance to the purpose of this study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2009).

Figure 4:3. provides an overview of the years that REC participants had been in the role.

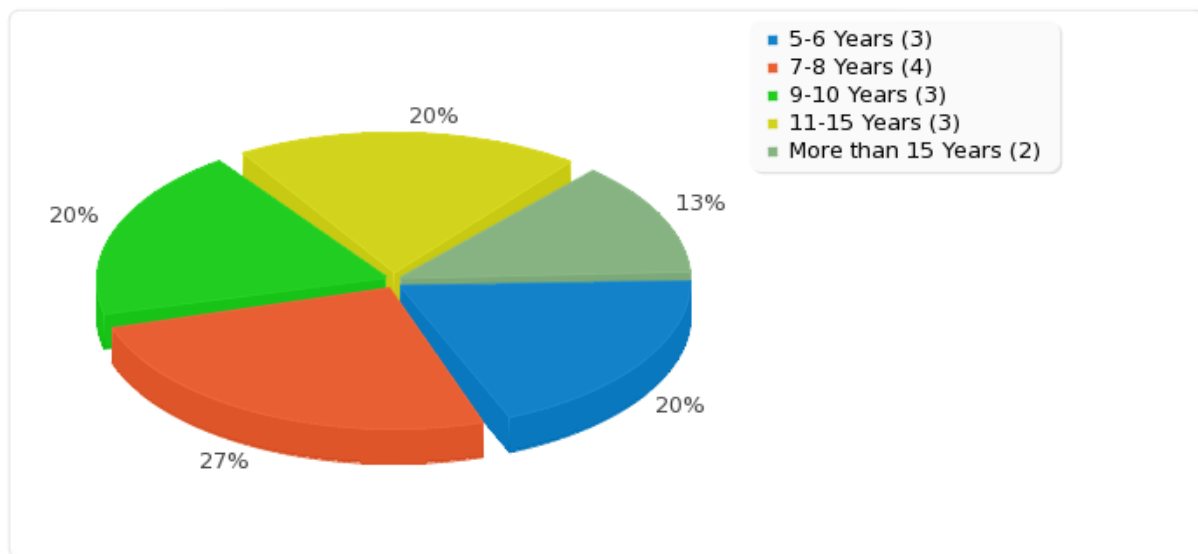


Figure 4:3. Summary of survey participants years in the role as REC

Figure 4:3. highlights that there was an acceptable range of experience and perspectives gained from emerging as well as RECs more established in their career. *Figure 4:4.* demonstrates the years RECs had been teaching.

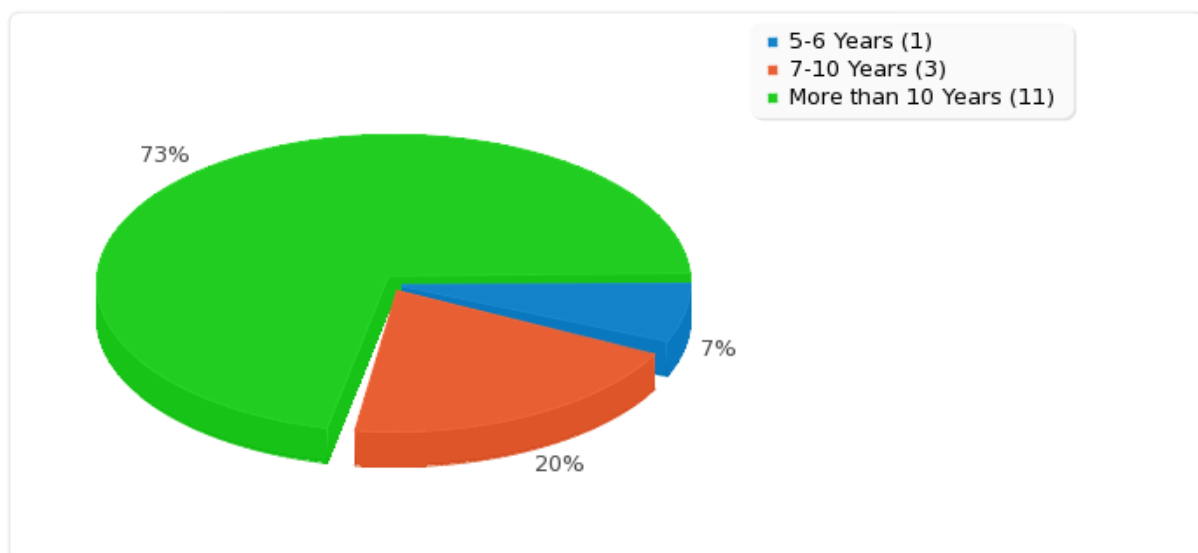


Figure 4:4. Summary of survey REC participants years of teaching

This section discusses the professional learning strategies employed by RECs and effective strategies advocated by RECs. A summary of these findings is provided in Table 4.5. *Findings of Forms of Professional Learning employed with RE staff and Effective Models of Professional Learning.* This is presented in decreasing order of frequency.

Table 4.5.
Findings of Forms of Professional Learning employed with RE staff and Effective Models of Professional Learning.

Forms of professional learning employed with RE staff	Effective models of professional learning
Formal	Formal
Level/Team/PLT planning 9	Direct impact on classroom practice 8
Whole school/staff meeting/days 5	Team learning 6
Specialist time with REC/other leader 4	Trial and error, reflection 5
Action research, small group trials 3	Facilitated planning 5
External facilitator/support 3	Ongoing school based 3
One off programs/retreats 1	Theory with concrete examples 2
Informal	Informal
Resourcing – reading materials, hands outs, emails 3	Ongoing, informal interactions/support 3
Group discussion feedback 1	Resourcing 2
1-1 assistance 1	Open conversations/feedback 1
Mentoring 1	
One off activities 1	

Whilst a range of professional learning forms were employed by RECs for RE staff, these could be divided into formal and informal strategies. The overwhelming majority of these were formal and school based aimed at small teams/levels. This was also the preferred mode of professional learning of classroom teachers. Facilitated planning (i.e. planning with the guidance of another “in house” expert) was another model employed which correlates with classroom teachers responses. The finding by RECs in regard to the use of an external specialist/expert was rated low. Interestingly, now two sets of participants both RECs and classroom teachers have demonstrated a dwindling regard for an external specialist to conduct professional learning in RE. These findings linked with the synopsis of literature in

Chapter two (refer Table 2.1.) which demonstrated the movement away from traditional types of professional learning to more school based alternative approaches. According to the data a range of informal means to provide professional learning to staff was employed by RECs, however, many were only single responses. Of greater interest was that informal ways were cited more often as effective modes of professional learning for RE staff. This variation is not an isolated example.

Of further significance to this study was a close comparison between forms of professional learning provided to RE teachers and the models suggested as effective professional learning by RECs. The discrepancy between these two is apparent and warrants discussion. For example, in the left column of Table 4.5. external facilitators and “one off” professional learning are conducted by RECs although these are not mentioned as effective strategies by RECs. This incongruence is difficult to understand. These results indicated that some RECs may employ professional learning strategies that they do not claim to be effective models of professional learning. Other areas of divergence were also noted.

RE classroom teachers valued pedagogical knowledge more than content knowledge as the results discussed earlier in this chapter confirm. Some disparity exists here as the REC survey results demonstrated that content knowledge was articulated more frequently and strongly by RECs. The significance of content knowledge for RE teachers was expressed by REC 1: “The students benefit from having a confident, knowledgeable teacher who can help them in their learning”. Conversely, if RE teachers lack content knowledge this was viewed as an area of serious alarm for REC 3: “Despite a willingness to become engaged in the teaching of RE many teachers have limited background knowledge of the content. It can be difficult to know what is the next critical content to tackle”. REC 7 reiterated this serious shortcoming of some classroom teachers and explained it as “a lack of knowledge of the basics”. The consequences of this limitation for RE teachers and an awareness of the support that the REC can give to overcome this difficulty was understood by REC 13 who reflected: “I must be aware of, acknowledge, be sensitive to and respectful of the gaps in teachers’ motivation and content knowledge This is where I can help”. Similar to the expressed characteristics needed for PLCs identified in literature review, this response suggested that this REC valued the need to provide supportive conditions and environments for RE staff to learn within.

The repeated issue of lack of content knowledge for RE teachers as identified by several RECs can be alleviated according to REC 3. He/she proffered some strategies used within his/her context:

We lead regular 'big picture' staff meetings leading staff towards a deeper understanding of doctrine and church traditions. We have had 2 staff complete Masters in RE over the last 4 years and currently have 3 staff completing accreditation studies with support from members of the RE leadership team.

These strategies mentioned by RECs were also supported by findings from the RE classroom teachers' data. There was additional consensus about combining ongoing in school meetings/ learning with opportunities to explore relevant RE content with the assistance of formal academic study. This blended approach appears to be balanced and an appropriate remedy to support teachers to develop the content knowledge and pedagogical skills needed to successfully implement their RE teaching. REC 3 recognized "We are fortunate to work with a highly responsive group of teachers who openly share 'where they are at' with whatever we are learning about". This experience suggested Catholic primary schools which can develop honesty, trust and mutual respect with their RE staff may be better placed to identify, support and help overcome RE teachers' lack of content knowledge. The importance of developing trust and productive trusting relationships was emphasized in the literature review as being at the heart of successful system consultancy (Buckingham & Clifton, 2005; Cosner, 2009; Wheatley, 2006). This model also indicated that Catholic primary schools that can find successful ways to manage this key issue efficiently and effectively will be better placed to ensure that the lack of content knowledge of staff does not hinder or interfere with student learning in RE.

Whilst pedagogical knowledge in professional learning was of prime concern to RE classroom teachers, it was of secondary value yet still a concern for RECs. REC 2 noted that professional learning could provide "self-confidence, better teaching practice, contemporary learning approach addressing student needs, increased student engagement". Likewise REC 3 concurred:

Prior to each new unit a member of the RE leadership team spends time with the teaching team, discussing the units and adjusting them to suit the needs of our students and our philosophy of a personalised curriculum. In whole staff meetings we use a combination of input from leaders or outside personnel and always include a lot of time for discussion and interactions with the materials.

This response echoed the call for a balanced approach to the use of outside and in school professional learning facilitators. The need for increased knowledge in relation to pedagogy and resourcing cited earlier by classroom teachers was also affirmed by REC 6 who agreed and stated: “direct positive impact on classroom teaching and resourcing e.g. ME [External professional learning facilitator] left us with interactive white board resources and teachers love it!”

Further consensus between classroom RE teachers and RECs was apparent in relation to a concern for the timing of the delivery of professional learning. Various RECs’ comments indicated that they were conscious of the impact that the time of the day set aside for RE professional learning had on the learning experience. This tension was highlighted by REC 7 who described the difficulty of “lack of interest from staff, majority of non-practising staff, time allocated after staff meeting, usually from 4.30-5.00pm when everyone wants to go home!” REC 1 illuminated this issue further: “I’m always conscious that this usually comes at the end of the day and there are some people who just hate having to take part no matter what”. In addition to the concerns about professional learning being relegated to the end of the day, there were also repeated claims about the lack of priority and status given to the time allocated to RE professional learning. These claims were strikingly similar to those of the classroom teachers. REC 5 explained this dilemma:

I attempt to educate staff in an ad hoc manner, while the time I have with staff is so small and infrequent that it is difficult to deepen their understanding, challenge them to trial and feedback on any new strategies from one unit to the next. The time is enough only to superficially evaluate a unit, plan the next and agree on some of the assessment pieces.

Common to these responses is the prerequisite that sufficient time be allocated to any RE professional learning initiatives, a claim which has serious consequences according to Birman, Desimone, Porter and Garet, (2000), who suggested that unless adequate time can be given, it would be better not to provide the program at all! The experience described by REC 5 affirmed that the potential benefits of highly relevant and educationally sound ideas which may transform teacher practice and benefit student learning in RE are at the very least, compromised unless due attention is given to the importance and value of RE professional learning. Another experience of REC 14 highlighted that even when priority may be designated, this may not come to fruition in practice. His/her reflection noted:

Each term I am timetabled to go to planning with each team level for two hours. This year formal PLT time given to religious education has only been 2 hours in three terms! The staff involved in the sacraments have had to meet with me after school for two/three hours for each sacrament.

Both classroom teachers and RECs shared a common anxiety in regard to the status afforded to professional learning in RE. The lack of priority given to RE in relation to other learning areas was reinforced by REC 8 who referred to the disturbing status of RE and claimed:

Where do I start- there are so many demands on time/priorities and sometimes RE takes second place to other areas/needs in the school. I think this perception is slowly changing but time/funds/structures are needed to make this a reality.

REC 5 in agreement with this perceived view espoused:

Lack of priority- the level I believe is small because other areas are seen as a priority. There is no minimum numbers of PLT timetabled for RE and so with the CTLM needing a PLT every two weeks now for our second year in a row, the situation has worsened.

There is now mounting evidence that RE professional learning is not treated equally to some other key learning areas and is consequently not sufficiently valued by some schools. These statements suggest that different RE stakeholders' perceptions relegate RE below other learning area priorities. This finding is significant and difficult to accept especially for stakeholders who wish to attain quality RE. In both Chapters one and two it was demonstrated that RE is the cornerstone of Catholic schools and must be a distinguishing feature of the school, which is supported by the statement "Religious education is to be recognized as a scholarly discipline, possessing the same rigor as other disciplines" (GDS, 1977, n. 73). In practice, data from both classroom teachers and RECs confirmed that this is not the case. It is necessary to further investigate the contemporary phenomenon of the dissonance between the officially stated purposes of the Catholic school and the reality that its stakeholders do not necessarily embrace these in practice. In the data generated by focus groups and interviews with RECs and CEO representatives, it may be possible to determine the extent to which the issues of dissonance between stated purposes and reality is felt by other key stakeholders who are directly responsible for RE. This will provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon.

Summary of Stage One Findings from RECs

Despite the array of options and at times conflict in views about how to provide effective professional learning in RE, some general lines of agreement between classroom teachers and RECs have emerged. The majority of participants accepted that RE professional learning was needed to deepen teachers' pedagogical content knowledge. Closely tied to this, was the requirement that this professional learning (either formal or informal), be closely connected to RE teachers' own work in the classroom where the learning can be referenced to particular children and classroom contexts. Both RECs and classroom teachers testified to the power of professional learning which can help them to better understand and ultimately transform their teaching RE practices which may have a positive impact on student outcomes. Effective professional learning will, in part, be dependent upon the purpose and design of opportunities cognisant that the process needs to be highly reflective, sustained and immediate to RE classroom contexts.

Final remarks about Stage One findings

The first stage of this research focused on the perspective of a relatively large range of RE classroom practitioners in the Melbourne primary context and included comments from fifteen RECs. This stage was concerned with how they understood their professional learning needs and expectations in RE. An electronic survey was designed to allow teachers and RECs to describe this understanding. Survey results from classroom teachers and RECs provided a representation both explicitly and implicitly of how each understood RE professional learning in the Catholic primary school context. The data gathered from stage one surveys provided an illuminating yet, at times, worrying picture of how the professional learning needs of religious educators are expressed and met. There was some clear alignment with what classroom teachers regarded as essential principles and practices of RE professional learning and those of RECs. Whilst this chapter presented the various components of what constitutes effective professional learning experiences, the categories identified in this stage are mutually inclusive and, at the same time, remain distinctive but complementary to the other categories. Acknowledgement was made that RE classroom teachers require specific preparation in the many different disciplines of religion they will be required to teach in the classroom RE program. Of further significance to this study was that participants stipulated a common need to provide an appropriate grounding for teachers to teach RE in schools and to broaden their areas of competencies in RE that is, to go beyond a basic understanding of and teaching

approaches to Scripture, traditions and beliefs of the Christian faith. They valued opportunities to develop a broader understanding of the educational foundations of RE in the early, middle and senior years of primary school.

As a corollary of the above discussion, it is clear that RE teachers are required to use the best teaching and learning materials, to be knowledgeable in the field of religion and aim to deepen students' understanding of the topics presented through contemporary pedagogies and curriculum supports. As professional educators, there is an expectation that RE teachers will have appropriate formal qualifications and expertise in their specified curriculum to best teach RE. However, the findings illustrated that both formal and informal professional learning can enrich a teachers' professionalism and help achieve this expectation. Both classroom teachers and RECs agreed that they learned best when they perceived that they could translate their professional learning directly to their classroom. Whilst participants overwhelmingly valued the benefits of professional learning for their classroom teaching, a not insubstantial number of participants did not agree. Some participants voiced reservations about the practicality and transference of the RE professional learning experience to the classroom. The discussion of the findings presented in this chapter also pointed to tensions and variations in the priorities and practices of professional learning (for example, the recurring tension between what teachers perceive is expected in professional learning and what the school believed it needed to do/provide in terms of professional learning). Intertwined with these concerns was a perceived variance between professional learning practices in RE and those which occur in other key learning areas. The neglect or lack of credence given to the time and priority of RE presents serious anomalies. Many implications and consequences for students and classroom teachers follow from these considerations and these are examined in more detail in Chapter eight.

Data derived inductively from classroom teachers and RECs guided the development of the theoretical framework which follows. Drawing on the perspectives of these stakeholders this helps explain the models/approaches to professional learning suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools.

Theoretical Proposition about Stage One Findings

In light of this display and the discussion of these findings, the chapter concludes by offering the following theoretical proposition:

Theoretical proposition: Whilst no one model of RE professional learning is entirely adequate, consideration of different understandings of the purpose, design and organisation can inform professional learning in RE. Effective professional learning in RE is strongly motivated by pragmatic concerns with a need to translate the learning and find evidence of its impact within the RE classroom. The learning of RE teachers is strongly influenced by the context of the culture in which the professional learning and teaching practice takes place.

RE professional learning is best viewed as an active, collaborative, ongoing process, during which teachers' different and diverse needs about a depth of content knowledge, sound teaching/learning strategies and resources are likely to be of benefit, together with a clear understanding of how to translate any new learnings into classroom practice. The effectiveness of RE professional learning should, therefore, never be isolated from its impact on the RE classroom and student learning.

RECs and other key RE stakeholders, by leading and actively participating in regular professional learning initiatives within the school context, can focus reflection and encourage the refinement of teacher practices to better enable student learning in RE. If professional learning is to be a valued, integral part of an RE teacher's professional life, partnerships and forums need to be established so that ongoing collaboration and learning can occur. The need to support RE teachers' ongoing growth with respect to their development as professionals and with a view to student achievement can be achieved only if suitable time, priority and support structures are present to ensure that there is no discrepancy between what is intended and what occurs in the day to day experiences of RE teachers professional learning.

Following this theoretical proposition Chapter four concludes with some final comments.

Conclusion to the Chapter

The categories that emerged from stage one of the research illuminated important themes which go toward answering the research questions for this study. However, it must be remembered that this is an iterative process which involves more than a simple thematic analysis but a *framing and re-framing* of the leadership of RE professional learning. As tentative answers to the initial research are developed and categories constructed, these initial frameworks are tested and verified through the subsequent data collection. A further analysis of the emerging tensions is the focus of chapters to come.

The next chapter, Chapter five, presents analysis of the data collected during stage two and is concerned with the research question:

According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?

Chapter five discusses the findings of this study with respect to the implications for REC leadership practice in Catholic primary school.

CHAPTER FIVE: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS STAGE TWO- PART ONE

Introduction to the Chapter

The previous chapter provided a summary of the findings in stage one of this research and generated theory in response to the first research question:

According to key stakeholders what models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools?

Chapter five displays and discusses the findings of this study in relation to part one of stage two and draws on the results generated from focus groups with RECs and principals. In doing so the chapter addresses the next research question:

According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen the leadership role of the REC in professional learning of RE?

As the purpose of stage two was to address research questions which focused on the leadership role of the REC in professional learning, it was logical to ask those most closely involved in leading professional learning in RE in Catholic primary schools for their insights. Using a GT approach, chapter five displays the data for each of the emergent key categories and their respective sub-categories. A discussion of the key categories and sub-categories follows the display of data. The chapter also provides a summary which draws together the major findings and provides a commentary on their significance in light of the literature. It identifies the implications for the leadership practice of RECs. The chapter concludes by presenting further theoretical propositions with respect to the supports which assist the REC to lead professional learning in RE in Catholic primary schools.

Stage Two Findings -RECs

The first section of this chapter draws on the data generated in stage two from the focus groups with RECs. The focus groups were an “organised discussion”, of approximately forty minutes to one hour (Lichtman, 2010). The focus groups aimed to understand the factors

which supported RECs in their leadership of professional learning. The discussion was organised by the researcher so that perceptions of participants about a specific area of interest - the supports of leadership of professional learning, - could be gathered (Patton, 2002). Stage one was considered to be preliminary findings, representing a work in progress. Therefore when the focus groups were transcribed and closely analysed using a qualitative approach by way of constant comparative data analysis (Creswell, 2009), it was possible to compare the collected responses from the focus groups with the data generated in Stage one. Consequently it can be claimed that the focus groups served to complement the data from the surveys and contributed to the validity of the findings by verifying the views and understandings emerging from stage one.

Table 5.1.

Summary of the Participants in the Focus Groups conducted in Stage two of this research

Composition of focus group	Context of focus group	Number of participants
Focus Group One RECs	Western Region	4
Focus Group Two RECs	Northern Region	5
Focus Group Three Principals	Northern & Western Region	5

As anticipated, the focus groups yielded more expressive data beyond that obtained from the stage one surveys, and the participants communicated with one another by asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view (Creswell, 2009).

REC participants

The RECs who participated in the focus groups were deliberately chosen from different regions of the Melbourne Archdiocese (Northern & Western) to ensure that a range of perspectives was obtained. To be eligible to participate in the focus groups RECs needed to have five or more years in the leadership role. Noticeably RECs who agreed to participate in the focus groups had been in the role for some length of time (most at least double the amount stipulated in the criteria). Of further significance was that in addition to the range of experience within the role, participants had availed themselves of the opportunity for

leadership development and they were very well qualified. The dual combination of experience and academic qualifications in the field of RE would assist them to effectively function in their position. It also may explain their enthusiasm and willingness to communicate, explore and critique key issues that contribute to professional discussions and writings in the field of RE.

All participants displayed a passion and commitment to their REC role. They conveyed varying views about their educational leadership responsibilities in RE. In speaking about this commitment REC K explained: “We are passionate otherwise we would not be in the gig, we are extremely passionate but it is a hard gig and it is not popular but we have to make it [RE] popular, engaging and exciting”. Their desire to create the conditions that motivate and optimize teacher and student learning were evident. REC K’s dialogue continued for another five minutes as he/she expressed a responsibility to work closely with the school community to assist them in their role to facilitate RE effectively.

Likewise from a different focus group, REC S reiterated this dedication for the role when he/she stated: “We pass on our passion to parents, kids and staff”. These comments were indicative of the staunchness demonstrated by many of the focus group participants to assist not only teachers with planning and implementing effective RE within individual classrooms, but also to improve the quality of RE across schools as a whole.

Along with this interest in the REC role was a clear demonstration of the influence of academic study and how it had shaped some of the RECs’ thinking in regard to their responsibilities in their position. This was made evident by REC B when articulating how he/she perceived the function of his/her leadership role: “I see my role following Gabriel Moran’s model of teaching RE as subject area and teaching kids to be religious in particular way and we have both components at our school”. This understanding represented a holistic understanding of RE and the application of scholarly thinking was seen as intrinsically relevant to the day to day functioning/responsibilities associated with the role of the REC. When exploring this perspective further, it was apparent that the professional learning opportunities espoused by the RECs within both focus groups included numerous examples which indeed fit both perspectives of Moran (1991). Further the findings relating to the strengths and challenges of leading professional learning also fit within these perspectives. The first dimension, teaching for understanding of religion, makes up the classroom religion

program, where religious literacy takes precedence (Ryan & Grajczonek, 2007). The second dimension, the religious life of the school/classroom focuses on, teaching to be religious in a particular way (Moran, 1991). This refers to the faith formation of students and contributes to the religious life of the school/classroom (Moran, 1991). The participants spoke of this as a process that fosters and nurtures the students' religious practices and assists them to grow in their Christian faith. This development goes beyond the classroom and is evident in daily prayer sessions, establishment of prayer gardens, liturgies, etc. (Ryan, 2008). As is evident in the data examined later in this chapter, the RECs also recognized that the Catholic school as a whole promotes and assists in faith education whilst recognizing "parents are the principal and first educators of their children" (CCC, 1653), where the teacher's role is to support and complement families (Ryan, 2008).

The focus groups also drew attention to the fact that professional learning opportunities for parents/families within Catholic primary schools are often organized or led by RECs. The Second Vatican Council acknowledged parents as the first and foremost educators of their children (*Gravissimum Educationis [GS]-On Christian Education*, 1965). It is within the family that children first come to know God, the meaning of celebrating a meal, forgiveness, healing and commitment. Given this key tenet, it was understandable that the RECs in the focus groups claimed that a thrust of RE professional learning at their primary schools was to support, as well as augment, the role of parents in their very important mission. This perspective, whilst present, was not prominent in earlier findings. The focus group discussions also signaled that both teaching people religion and teaching people to be religious must draw from the Catholic Christian beliefs in a way that is sensitive to ecumenical and multi-faith beliefs as well as the local context, with both dimensions being sensitive to the traditions of Catholicism (Barry & Brennan, 2008). These acknowledgements again point to a sophisticated understanding of recent scholarly developments in RE.

The major themes covered in the focus groups are now discussed and examined in more detail. The categories and sub categories include comprehensive and yet diverse perceptions about leadership of professional learning. All responses were remarkably candid and often very positive. RECs appeared unanimous that if RE classroom teachers are to present faithfully and with integrity the richness of the Catholic tradition, then ongoing professional learning was necessary. RECs across the diocese consistently demonstrated a desire to support and sustain teachers in effectively operationalising RE in the Catholic

primary school through organising, facilitating or leading professional learning in different guises. The role of the REC in leading professional learning was facilitated in each school in various ways and with a variety of impact. One respondent, REC S, answered very directly and purposefully about his/her view of the leadership role when he/she declared: “I see my position as RE leader, as a leader of learning, certainly I have opportunities to do that in various ways”. This response left no room for doubt that the leadership and educational dimension of the role was prominent and active for this respondent. REC S’s response went on to articulate the variety of ways professional learning was enacted within their school community. The examples cited are reflected in the categories to be examined later in this section. However, this definitive perception of seeing the role as a leader of learning proved to be contentious as will be demonstrated in later findings.

For some participants the RECs leadership role in professional learning was highly explicit. Other responses however, whilst not necessarily as overt, were able to provide some examples of how their role influenced professional learning although they conceded that their effect may have been minimal. Likewise the focus group discussions reinforced that not all RECs engaged in leadership of learning that was supported to the same degree. This discrepancy will become more pronounced when the challenges to the leadership role of the REC in professional learning are examined in detail later in this thesis.

The findings from these focus groups confirmed that RECs’ responsibilities associated with professional learning activities occurred in three broad categories: a) formal structured opportunities; b) formal structured opportunities in partnership with other key stakeholders directly associated with the quality of RE in the primary school and c) informal opportunities such as sharing resources/information.

Table 5.2. *Overview of the role of the REC in leading RE Professional Learning opportunities* presents the categories and sub-categories which emerged from the focus group discussions.

Table 5.2.
Overview of the role of the REC in leading RE Professional Learning opportunities

Category	Sub Category
Formal structured opportunities within the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole staff meeting • Planning meetings/PLTs • Expert facilitators • Adult sacramental/Family nights • Reflection days
Formal structured opportunities in partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clustered PD with neighboring schools • RE conference • Modeling
Informal opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information dissemination • Short whole staff briefing sessions • Resourcing

Table 5.2. illustrates the range in depth and purpose of initiatives from purposeful targeted and practical professional learning opportunities in collaboration with others to adhoc, pure information dissemination initiatives.

Category One: Formal Structured Opportunities within the School

The initial category for discussion is formal structured professional learning activities, which were commonly described as deliberately planned. According to RECs, these opportunities were highly publicised and often had allocated times in the school calendar. Sometimes the focus was on the individual teacher and at other times the emphasis was on level, team or school planning. Although a range of options was discussed, there appeared agreement that all these options should be viewed as an intrinsic and important part of school and classroom improvement.

Deliberate learning revolves around a “definite learning goal” (Eraut, 2004, p. 250). RECs indicated that the formal structured opportunities were clearly specified and planned with key stakeholders so, given this premise, they could be considered deliberate. The sub-categories illustrated that professional learning was extended across a school (including whole and small teams) to include parents and external consultants. The sub-categories were again agreed initiatives often originating from SIPs. As REC K explained: “Each school works through their SIP about what should be happening in RE”. RECs’ discussions revealed

that their core objective was not simply to improve teacher morale or understanding of technical skills. Instead RECs were conscious of using these structured professional learning opportunities to focus directly on the relationship between teacher practice and RE students. All discussions within this category and the associated sub-categories demonstrated a commitment to student learning in RE. However, this category also indicated that intentional supervision was required to achieve this commitment.

The focus on improving student learning was consistently articulated and referenced despite the varying examples presented to achieve this goal. The clear purpose was palpable in the following extract: “How do I help this young person to love what we love and to love what they are doing (teaching RE)?” REC K. The particular passion with which RECs pursued engagement with formal structured professional learning and the benefits that resulted from these structured professional learning was apparent in the following comment from REC D: “I have no doubt that RE is taught better when teachers have a real understanding of what they are teaching and planning and that is where I try most to assist”. Planning meetings and PLTs were the most frequently and favoured means of formal knowledge creation which happened in these primary schools according to the participant REC K:

I am allocated twice a term, 2 hour PLTs to work with each level of teachers and we are extremely lucky. That time has been an absolute unpacking of the curriculum, unpacking of their own ideas, excitement in their own ideas, really moving away from CTKWL units and looking at what do they [RE classroom teachers] and really want in their learning intentions in RE.

This view affirmed that PLTs can be designed and implemented to result in changed professional practice for the benefit of RE students. RECs indicated that through PLTs RE teachers as professionals can become deeply knowledgeable about both the content of what is taught and how to teach it. RE teachers also expressed this need, as evident in the data analysed in Chapter four. The above extract illustrated that through PLTs some RE teachers felt confident to adapt and evaluate the current RE curriculum used in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. The value of RE teachers critiquing curriculum documents to appropriate and interpret them at the local level is substantiated by recent studies in the Australian context (Engebretson & Grajczonek, 2012; Healy, 2011). Further it provided an opportunity to be vigilant in relation to the intended RE learning which should take place in the primary RE classroom.

Another strong indication of the value of PLTs and the benefits of their collegial nature was evident in the following extract by REC K when he/she claimed:

Teachers are scared of their knowledge of Church and where it is all at. Teachers like PLTs because they say they feel more comfortable in a small group and can really learn and eventually it is kind of second nature to them and they look forward to sharing their experiences together and learning from one another.

Again the worth of PLTs was also acknowledged by REC G who provided an example of his/her experiences:

Sitting and planning with teachers, I think that planning in PLTs is when the just in time, real learning takes place. The classroom teacher asks questions if they are not sure about something. It is very real, targeted and practical. PLTs are great vehicles to meet teachers where they are at. It is a safe conversation because it is about the unit of work it is not about what I know and what I don't know, they (teachers) can ask questions and it is not about them, it's about the kids.

What is common to these observations is that at the core of such endeavours is an understanding that professional learning is about teachers learning, learning how to learn and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefits of their students' growth.

Of further interest to this research was that RECs claimed that RE teachers are feeling increasingly confident to meaningfully participate in professional learning options especially PLTs. RECs' responses contended that these formal structured forums genuinely supported RE teachers in their learning. The extracts presented earlier captured this sentiment with phrases such as "comfortable" and "safe conversations". REC B shared prompts used about RE pedagogy such as "How does that feel? Does it fit? Are you happy with it or what has improved and stuff like that". It may be argued that participating RE teachers felt a degree of reassurance, security and routine in these opportunities, a view which resonates with the work of Goodall, Day, Lindsay, Muijs and Harris, (2005), who noted that teachers who feel supported in their professionalism and their learning endeavours are more likely to remain committed to their classroom roles. Further, practices in schools that motivate staff by providing opportunities for learning, feedback growth and responsibility are more likely to result in increased productivity and job satisfaction (Shepherd, Seifert, Brien & Williams, 2010).

Whole staff meetings were another means to unpack content, to inform staff and promote professional learning directly linked to classroom practice in RE. RECs in some

schools claimed that particular times were designated for whole staff to explore RE issues and build understanding of ways to enhance teaching in RE. REC S stated: “Although we now only have PLTs for numeracy and literacy, we do inject RE staff meetings at least once a term maybe twice (laughs)”. The discussion about using the forum of staff meetings with an intended link to the RE classroom was extended by REC D, who, in line with the previously articulated needs of classroom RE teachers noted in the previous chapter, expressed a concern for the relationship of content and practice to be linked as a priority. He/she argued:

We have staff pd at least once or twice a term totally devoted to RE at an adult level, a lot of teachers sort of know but they really don't. These staff meetings are devoted to understanding at an adult level where we help teachers with content and practice. However we always start with content and then hope teachers take away something practical. I find teachers need step by step of how to do this with children, how to, you know, apply all of this learning and take away something for their classroom. That is the key.

Affirming the findings in stage one, this example supported RE teachers' knowledge, as well as giving consideration to how this content knowledge could be transferred at a practical level to children in the RE classroom. REC D added further comment which confirmed his/her belief that professional learning must make a difference to RE teachers and their students. He/she voiced a concern that after structured professional learning “Staff do not just nod, think this is great but go back to their classroom and teach the last lesson they had in secondary school, that would be a tragedy”. This finding has clear implications for all professional learning indicating the need to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of teaching practices and their impact on student learning, in order to minimize teachers working in isolation without accountability.

The challenges of monitoring the impact of professional learning to teacher practice are not to be underestimated. Similar arguments are put by Woodbury and Gess-Newsome (2002), who criticised assumptions that there was valid evidence of teachers' assimilation of new ideas from professional learning into their classroom practice. Whilst it appeared RECs have a concern that professional learning should be carefully monitored and its impact evaluated, considerable research efforts, such as the UK study of Bubb and Earley (2008, p. 37), have highlighted that this issue seems yet to be resolved:

Evaluating the impact of staff development was found to be the weakest link in the training and development cycle; how outcomes have been improved and the quality of teaching and learning enhanced in our case study school were not made clear.

As Hattie's (2009) synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement revealed, the ultimate test of teachers' and school leaders' professional learning is the impact this learning has on student outcomes. In this study, accurate and confident judgements about the types of RE formal structured opportunities within schools that will have the greatest impact on RE teacher practice and on the achievement of their RE students is still required.

Summary of this category

The implementation of formal structured opportunities for RE professional learning meant that religious leadership in professional learning could be exercised in particular ways to ensure the ongoing development of teaching and learning in RE. Through such opportunities, participating RE teachers may be inspired to think more critically about their own RE practice and revise it accordingly, to pay more attention to how pupils learn in RE. In line with recent studies in the educational and RE context, (Healy, 2011; Ingvarson, Meirs & Beavis, 2005) common to this category was a focus on building learning teams/learning communities with a shared vision for quality RE. RECs agreed that a teacher working collaboratively with peers was the preferred mode of continued professional learning. Through the formal structured opportunities for professional learning some RECs helped direct the learning which occurred to ensure that deliberate agreed learning goals were achieved.

The role of the REC in this category could be referred to as an instructional leader. According to Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008), instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning and is sometimes known as "pedagogical leadership", or "leadership of learning". Based on this approach the role of the REC can encapsulate the strength of formal learning. Consequently, it was apparent that the capacity of the REC to develop and nurture RE staff to work collaboratively as a learning community can be crucial to the overall quality of RE delivered in the school.

Category Two: Formal structured opportunities in partnerships

The next category was formal structured opportunities, but distinct from the previous category, these opportunities occurred in partnership with other RE stakeholders. The sub-categories identify diverse perceptions about affiliation in the enterprise of RE. RECs shared different examples of professional learning which took place in partnership with neighbouring schools within the region, or more directly with a mentor like the REC. Such partnerships indicated a firm belief that local challenges are best met by local solutions. Explaining how this category might look in practical terms, REC M commented:

I really like shared professional learning, like regional clusters where the system (the CEOM) and neighboring schools work together in small clusters to encourage staff to go to PD and they learn in these clusters with other representatives from each school and with any additional staff who may choose to go.

According to the RECs, this shared local decision making has been favorably received by some RE staff. It served to raise the status of RE by placing great trust in the ability of local teachers working and learning in partnership to enhance the RE teaching practice and benefit RE students. By providing an easily accessible and local forums where information can be exchanged, digested and modeled, RE classroom teachers were helped to refresh their perspective on their role as an RE educator within the Catholic primary school. The example articulated by REC M was infused with experience and knowledge of both schools and the central system in mutual efforts to support teachers in the discipline of RE. Other RECs articulated similar circumstances of professional learning organized without central support by likeminded schools. REC M explained:

Another form of professional learning we provide is part of a cluster which is pd for teachers across the four schools. In the past four years we have had a different focus. All staff, administration and part time staff too are invited and involved. It covers a variety of topics like understanding of the human person, the church in the world today. In a couple of weeks we will focus on how we shape new Catholic identity different focus and topics.

A different example was forward by REC D who noted:

We have an RE conference mid year one day for whole school staff not just the RE staff and it might be about Abrahamic tradition, or more practical and it has gone over really well as teachers often say that we don't know what we don't know.

These experiences demonstrate an ongoing commitment from schools for all staff to encourage lifelong learning (European Commission, 2010; OECD, 2008) and to develop as a learning organization (Collison & Cook, 2007) where all involved in the endeavor of RE are actively and regularly engaged in shaping the learning agenda of the school.

A solid base of expert knowledge and skills, combined with opportunities for the school learning community in its entirety to interact, engage in serious dialogue and deliberate about the RE information and material being delivered can promote both individual and collective learning in RE. These examples displayed a huge commitment of personnel, time, resources and funding to promote and encourage shared understandings in RE. However, they offer a platform for the further examination of the viability and benefits of large professional learning practices moving beyond RE level staff to entire school staffs, or with neighboring school communities. These experiences validated that RE classroom practitioners can form clusters and have access to high quality experiences by sharing the expense of outside facilitators. They also valued the experience and expertise of what they claimed were highly skilled and knowledgeable local teachers.

Another means of developing partnerships was by what is commonly known as mentoring. This was illustrated from the comments of REC G who stated:

I have some opportunities to talk to classes directly as I have been invited in to talk to the class by the classroom teacher. This is interesting because as I am talking with the students I notice that the teacher is writing notes and I have come to realize that I am not just telling the kids, the teacher has no idea and they are learning too. So in fact I am actually helping teachers learn and they say afterwards is that really what that is all about.

A more intentional example of mentoring through modeling was provided by REC K who argued:

I also model to teachers but I have clear expectations that teachers will try it themselves. If I want them [RE staff] to engage in new or uncertain tasks in the RE classroom whether it be meditation or Godly play, I will show the effective or improved practice being sought and then debrief and prompt them to have a go for themselves.

Other instances of modeling were cited. REC B claimed: "I do that too, modeling that sort of thing". REC S agreed: "Yes modeling is great especially for new staff coming in". However

RECs conceded that the modeling needed follow up and support if further learning was to occur and noted that this condition was a key part of the success of the modeling strategy. REC B provided an example of “learning in context” when he/she explained “I also have the opportunity now to go into the classroom and work directly with teachers” (modeling). According to the RECs such practices seemed to lower teachers’ sense of vulnerability whilst, simultaneously, providing support for improvement in their RE endeavors. They also demonstrated a mutual willingness to collaborate with perceived experts to provide individual support through coaching or mentoring from experienced colleagues. This reiterated the work of Robertson (2005).

Summary of this category

RECs aimed in different ways, to create a learning community in which RE teachers had various opportunities to meet, talk, share and learn from one another. Mentoring functions were carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship and were seen as a nurturing process to model, teach, encourage and challenge professional learning. Whilst the existence of an active and accountable professional community within and across the school has been highlighted, this category provided evidence that there was also a concern to extend learning outside of the confines of the school community demonstrated in the pursuit of initiatives with neighbouring schools. These learning partnerships and networks helped RE staff to develop and share wisdom gleaned from practical experiences grounded in the realities of Catholic school communities. What was conspicuous by its absence was any mention of RE online professional learning opportunities to work, talk and seek advice from other RE educators. This suggests that the time may come, but not yet, when ICT will be so well embedded into professional learning consideration of RECs, that it will not require special attention.

All these formal structured initiatives in partnership with other stakeholders with a vested interest in RE proved a valuable means of “deprivatising” teachers’ practices and opening up more avenues for feedback and professional accountability within and beyond the school. Such strategies can motivate through thinking, reflection and analysis with a strong component of coaching and feedback. These collegial models within schools, as well as among local schools build viable and efficient pathways to support staff and student learning in RE.

Category Three: Informal opportunities

The final category generated was termed informal opportunities. The focus groups illustrated that many RECs were conscious of taking advantage of every opportunity to highlight and profile RE learning within schools in non-traditional, yet creative ways. That is, they recognised that professional learning may take place incidentally through various informal channels. These informal occasions, as REC G explained, were: “powerful opportunities to educate and get a message across”. This learning may be considered implicit (Eraut, 2004) and is described as “The acquisition of knowledge that takes place largely independently of conscious attempts to learn and largely in the absence of explicit knowledge about what was acquired” (Reber, 1983, p. 5). The ideas espoused, recognised that RECs provide enriched and tailored professional learning by adapting existing structures/locations to showcase and address particular RE priorities of the school. This was illustrated by comments from REC G:

I use a display board in the staff room to challenge thinking, provide a new perspective on a topic, so that to me, that wall as simple as it is, is a powerful opportunity to educate people and get a message across.

A similar initiative by REC D was deliberately planned to coincide with the Liturgical year (which supports and influences the planning and implementation of the RE program). REC D described his/her technique to stimulate and support informal teacher learning: “I use a seasonal noticeboard as an opportunity for when teachers want a quick grab of information”. This noticeboard served to keep RE staff up to date and aware of information in the wider RE educational landscape. For staff who regularly used this noticeboard, it was a means to challenge and integrate staff thinking and provided opportunities to move to new and collective levels of understanding. What is particular to these initiatives is that although the professional learning discussed may be viewed as implicit, as it relies on the interest and initiative of RE staff to access this helpful material provided by the REC, for the REC, the strategy was very intentional. The stimulus material and information was carefully planned to enhance the quality of RE teachers’ delivery of RE.

By providing RE teachers with materials (the noticeboard and accompanying information) and professional learning necessary for the successful execution of their jobs REC M believed this strategy resulted in less “handholding” by RECs of staff. The focus group discussion provided evidence that informal learning was in fact a calculated strategy to

help wean RE staff from a dependency model whilst aiming to provide by informal means access to new RE instructional practices.

Whilst acknowledging that RE teachers need opportunities to depth their learning, another REC S, when describing his/her experience of providing informal learning opportunities, suggested that these were always provided with an onus on the RE teacher to take some responsibility to critique the learning or resource material provided, to evaluate its usefulness to their particular class/circumstance. This stipulation was explicit in this excerpt:

I have developed a step by step guide of how to lead prayer. I say here are some ideas, I gently walk with teachers to give them some resources but I don't just hand them things I say, you read it and let me know if it is worthwhile for you. I really believe that we must empower others, not do it for them.

This view valued the need to provide staff with intellectual stimulation yet respected the “business” of classroom teachers as it provided ease and convenience to RE teachers by enabling them to grow professionally through a range of informal measures. Of further significance is that within the professional learning opportunities was a clear expectation that RE teachers would critique and build their own capacity to support the particular needs within their RE classroom. This notion of *capacity building* was significant. It represented a process which progresses from obtaining assistance to a less reliant self-help approach. It was repeated by other RECs who were keen to point out that they did not simply “just dish out papers, resources etc.” Instead REC M argued that the incidental learning and stimulus “helps teachers to deliver contemporary RE”. Likewise another REC, S clearly outlined his/her motive in regards to informal learning:

If a staff member is on [facilitating] prayer at assembly, they might ask will you print off a prayer from this book I need and I say I do not do photocopies. I try and empower staff to read the Ordo and help staff but not do it for them and that can be tricky at times.

The stimulus documentation and organisational systems provided by RECs allowed RE teachers to take greater control over their work and were an informal means which promoted professional responsibility for RE staff. This practical, new and challenging information provided by RECs can be an invaluable resource for RE teachers to inspire, support and facilitate their RE duties, shifting the focus from the short term goal to the long term.

Summary of this category

This category illuminated the fact that there were many valid informal learning initiatives which provide a legitimate platform for professional learning for RE staff. These take learning beyond formal opportunities and include the day to day interactions that take place through ongoing professional activities and information dissemination. The discussion validated that there were many benefits that accrue to staff and students as a result of effective professional learning through informal channels. All professional learning strategies required to launch, develop and sustain informal teacher professional learning aimed to promote student learning.

Again the importance of capacity building was prevalent in this category. RECs found informal ways to support engage and challenge RE staff in their ongoing RE professional learning endeavours. Different opportunities taken to listen to, engage with and respond to RE teachers' concerns and needs more informally were deemed as ways to further capitalise on staff professional learning but were always viewed as occasions to empower RE teachers through capacity building over pure accountability.

Implications for the leadership practice of the REC in professional learning

In support of the findings of stage one as outlined in Chapter four, RECs in the focus groups reiterated the need to have suitable trained and qualified RE teachers, supporting the intentions of RDE (CCE, 1988, n. 97) and acknowledged that the CEOs expend significant resources in money, time, professional expertise and administration in support of this goal. Throughout the focus groups RECs spoke using modern paradigms of leadership in reference to their role and support of professional learning viewing themselves not as the "lone ranger leader" but more akin to a distributed leadership model (Harris, 2011).

Although the implementation and leadership role of the REC in professional learning was inconsistent, there was a united view that professional learning for RE educators in Catholic primary schools must be carefully planned, monitored and delivered, always conscious of staff and student learning. Further, the findings from the RECs concurred with those of classroom teachers' cited in the previous chapter, who also illustrated that both formal and informal professional learning can enrich the RE teacher's professionalism. In addition there was agreement between the classroom teachers' survey results and the REC

focus groups findings that successful professional learning was most commonly school based supplemented with external modes of provision. Perhaps an active integration of and synergy between the two is needed to accommodate the diverse range of knowledge, needs, interests and backgrounds of RE classroom teachers.

Whilst stages one and two findings revealed key learning partnerships both within and beyond the Catholic school, what remains yet unknown is whether any RE teachers report any long term change in their beliefs or intended practice after completing ongoing professional learning experiences in RE and if so, what was the exact nature or extent of these changes. A need to further identify and gather formal and informal evidence of what is contributing to better outcomes for students in RE is fundamental to any future evaluative strategies.

Supports for Leadership role in Professional Learning

In response to the question, “According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE” the RECs responses illustrated that there were many factors which support and assist them in their varying responsibilities for professional learning. The RECs made substantial comments about the type of supports needed to succeed in their leadership role with professional learning. Yet unquestionably the predominant view was that without these supports in place their leadership role in professional learning was doomed to failure. To thoroughly understand the supports needed for leadership of professional learning, the important categories and their interrelationships must be clearly elucidated.

A summary of the categories which emerged as supports for RECs in their role is presented in the following Table, 5.3.

Table 5.3.

Summary of Categories which support the leadership role of REC in Professional Learning.

Category	Sub Category	Illustrative example provided from participant
Shared advocacy and commitment to RE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Leadership Teams • Parish priest 	“If principals and others leaders in the school do not actively support RE then you are on the back foot” (REC K).
Shared leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentoring • Coaching • Feedback 	<p>“I have a good working relationship with my principal. Her passion, commitment and expertise provided high quality guidance and assistance for me in my role” (REC B).</p> <p>“My PP is a great support. He co presents with me at Sacramental nights, he is able and ready to support me to the last – in every way possible” (REC S).</p>
Staff understanding and engagement in RE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal knowledge • Personal affiliation 	“Getting feedback from staff is really supportive and, makes me go a bit further the next time” (REC B).
RECs ongoing personal and professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upbringing, nurturing of faith • Written materials to update knowledge/ skills • Formal education programs • Informal interactions • Networking with RECs 	“Our own further study –post graduate I mean, really contributed to my own knowledge base and my ability to deliver PD as does some CEO in servicing” (REC B).
Structural/System supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocated Time • Release • Funding 	“In my school we have designated times and structures for professional learning, otherwise let’s face it they probably would not occur, these are great opportunities for me to help teachers extend their learning through reflection and practice” (REC D).

Category One: Shared Advocacy and Commitment to RE

The RECs were in agreement that a shared mutual concern for education based on a faith perspective was a prerequisite for primary Catholic schools in order to remain true to their purpose and reason for existence. According to the conversations in both REC focus groups, all leaders of the school must accept and model a perseverance and passionate commitment to the mission of Catholic Schools. A key support for RECs, according to the focus groups responses, was a clear vision shared by those undertaking RE developments and especially those charged with leading and supporting them. REC B expressed this understanding clearly: “The leadership team can provide a really great voice and if it is strong in the school then that is really important and supportive to me in my role”.

The category of shared advocacy and commitment to RE was commonly viewed as an ongoing task which entailed creating and communicating a shared vision for the Catholic primary school with RE as a priority. This belief was postulated by REC K when he/she claimed: “Basically we need shared recognition that RE is at the centre of everything that we do”. When explaining their desire and efforts to develop shared understandings and priority for RE in schools, common to each reflection was the requirement for the leadership team to, as was suggested in colloquial terms, “fly the flag for RE” (REC, G). This response accentuated the need for all leaders not just the REC or the principal, to understand and respect the key role of RE. This is a simple, yet crucial message to all stakeholders with a vested interest in supporting the leadership role of the REC. This support and advocacy must be shared. The following response from REC B was indicative of the responses from other RECs:

Sometimes I feel like we have to bang a drum and remind everyone one this is a **Catholic** (emphasis participant) school and say listen we are a Catholic school we have rights and responsibilities. What does that mean? What does that look like? What should we see and hear then? Let’s drop the saint in front of our school name otherwise and just call it school if we don’t take this seriously.

This excerpt confirmed the enduring concern to maintain a Catholic identity (Rossiter, 2013; Dowling, in press) in Catholic primary schools which was postulated in Chapter one. According to REC B this endeavour should be collectively embraced. The perspective put forward by this REC was not always shared as is illustrated later when discussing the challenges of leading professional learning (cf., Chapter six).

If RECs are to be successful in the leadership of RE professional learning they must be supported to focus and totally immerse the school community in the nature of RE. In the first instance, opportunities for the leadership team to seriously consider and converse about what makes Catholic schools distinctive is crucial if this is to be modelled to all other members of the school community.

Based on collaboration and partnerships underpinned by a shared vision of RE, all Catholic primary school leaders can maximize opportunities to empower teachers to grow and develop their capacity to improve student learning in RE. A shared vision to conceive of ways of increasing student learning in RE necessitates that leadership will apply appropriate pressure for this to occur for groups and/or individual teachers. This expectation was captured poignantly by REC G: “Basically they [leadership team] **must** (emphasis of participant) recognise you as leader and gifts that you have”. As simple as this statement may be, it highlights the obvious, RECs cannot lead learning in their school unless all leaders responsible for RE recognise and utilize their talents to set the direction of RE in the school. REC B reinforced: “I find the leadership team have been a great voice to help me” to which REC R, in agreement, stated “It is good to have a supportive leadership team”.

Many earlier studies have confirmed that the REC is most effective in their role if she/he is supported by the principal (Buchanan, 2007; Crotty, 2005; Healy, 2011; Neidhart & Carlin, 2006). This study has broadened this support beyond that of the principal to include the school leadership teams and the PP. Numerous RECs cited the PP as a key support, REC S typified the sentiments of positive parish involvement when he/she expressed “Yes the Parish Priest and the support network I get from the other REC (within the Parish) the pastoral associate, that’s good too”.

Advocacy and support among these key stakeholders offer the most likely avenue for successful leadership of professional learning. Responses suggested that to harness the leadership potential of the REC may mean movement from the traditionally administrative and management roles to a distinctive leadership role. A key difference noteworthy to this study is that the latter is more visionary, inspirational, energising and empowering than the limited, restrictive, traditional managerial role.

A shared view from the focus group discussions suggested that RECs active and valued participation in leadership meetings must be a prerequisite. In this way, RECs could

become real advocates for RE to all stakeholders in the school. Participants explained how within the school leadership team, a focus for RE in the school occurred when they helped to establish clear goals and had opportunities to keep these goals at the forefront of the school's attention. The RECs' presence and active participation in school leadership teams also makes an important statement about the value of their leadership to Catholic primary schools. The focus group discussions suggested that an active leadership role was also encouraged and demonstrated in associated responsibilities where the REC maintained high visibility around the school (for example, the REC leading school assemblies or instigating new school wide RE initiatives). Public opportunities for participation in key decision making by RECs who are willing and able to assume leadership when needed, was clearly articulated. REC B's experience suggested that an openness to the boundaries of leading RE was broadened. He/she explained how the school's leadership team gave both permission and backing for him/her to use their expertise and influence to establish a new shared responsibility in RE. This success story of promoting and establishing a new whole school initiative, a time for school RE fellowship, had a long-term impact. In the words of REC B:

Where we come together as a whole school for regular prayer, each grade may lead this session and I see that it is really important. It has become part of the culture of our school now so if I get hit by a bus I know it will keep going as it is now valued. It is a vehicle for real learning to occur for both staff and students.

This very public vision to strengthen RE within the school was clearly articulated and widely supported throughout this school community. It provided the REC with stepping stones from the classroom to wider professional responsibilities within the entire school. Whilst the REC represented and acted as an advocate to extend and improve RE, it was the initial and ongoing support of the leadership team and PP which empowered the REC to act with the needs of the school's students at the heart of the decision making. Within this reflection were opportunities to simultaneously build the REC's leadership capacity and the professional culture of RE in the school.

Summary of this category

Arguably all school members, but more especially those in designated leadership roles, must advocate, demonstrate and evaluate the priority given to RE within the school. A significant shared responsibility of school leaders is a commitment to the pursuit of quality RE. The RECs' testimonies provided clear examples of what can be achieved with a shared passion

and vision for the ongoing and explicit advocacy of RE in the school. Recognition of the powerful role played by supportive leadership which explicitly and actively promotes the religious dimension of the school is one pertinent lesson to be learned from this research. With a clear vision to drive decisions and provide opportunities to reinforce the importance of RE within the school, RE teachers' professional learning will not be an afterthought for leadership teams. Rather, all school/parish leaders must be responsible to ensure it is a priority, not only in written documents, but in the daily realities of the religious life of the school. Prioritising of teachers' learning through the provision of rich and multiple opportunities for learning with the direct support and backing of the leadership team was well justified by the RECs in the outcomes they had achieved.

Category Two: Shared leadership

RECs repeatedly spoke positively of the value of shared leadership. In recent years a veritable explosion of literature on shared leadership based on the idea of mutual learning has shifted the focus away from individual leaders (i.e. the REC) to the notion of distributed leadership (Harris, 2011). When talking about leadership, respondents often used the collective pronoun "we". This provided much evidence to support the contention that the old model of formal, one person lone leadership leaves substantial talents of others largely untapped. A majority of participants shared the understanding that RE leadership must be a shared community undertaking and category two data confirmed that some Catholic primary schools are inventing and experimenting with many forms of shared leadership participation as a means to help them understand who they are in their role and also recognise who supports them to be who they are. Overall the notion of distributed leadership or shared leadership was not given lip service but was genuinely and actively pursued. This affirmed Gardners (1989) perspective that "every great leader is teaching and every great teacher is leading" (p. 18).

Various RECs valued opportunities to work in a shared leadership role or as Healy, (2011) argued, to complement each other. The high regard for shared leadership support was clearly expressed by REC Y: "I recognise that as REC I am not solely responsible for RE in the school and that's the way it should be". Shared leadership when described by the RECs in the focus groups was defined as broad based skilful participation in the work of leadership. The unequivocal claim by REC K: "We need our Catholic identity and we share this Catholic identity" is a truism which provides the basis of this category.

However, shared leadership and responsibility for RE required deliberate actions. This included a range of practices for the development of those with future leadership capacity to participate together as mutual learners and leaders. Through coaching, mentoring and reflection, supportive partnerships were developed which RECs contended strengthened RE within the school community and was helpful to them in their role. Typically these experiences often occurred with the principal, a designated member of the leadership team/staff or the PP. Commonly, these opportunities were portrayed as occasions to listen to, engage with, and respond to the many challenges and opportunities that RECs faced in leading RE. The focus group discussions suggested that opportunities to reflect on the joys and challenges of leading RE teaching in a Catholic school with a partner who shared a distinctive religious perspective and was also in a leadership position was enriching and highly supportive. This shared collegial and professional relationship was expressed by REC B:

If I get tangled with something, what does this mean, especially with my own knowledge, you have to be spot on with what you say, and it has to be just right, watertight, with theology and stuff, I speak to the PP. They are someone to bounce information off. My PP has great knowledge and I often bounce ideas off him.

This example of what may be viewed as “just in time learning” at critical points of need for the REC increased the confidence of this individual in their leadership capacity. Further, this reflective practice enabled the REC to benefit from accessing an expert in the field that can put their work within a solid framework of what RE leadership is all about. The collegial conversation also enabled the participant to identify and rectify gaps in their own knowledge. This practice can be linked to teacher appraisal, improved performance and actions in the school which have far reaching positive consequences.

Whilst shared leadership was viewed as an opportunity for RECs’ own professional growth, it also provided support in nurturing their sense of vocation and leadership identity. When describing this partnership and the resulting benefits REC B espoused:

working closely with the principal is a blessing for me, I do a lot with my principal and she mentors me with professional learning and supports me by providing feedback. Like not if it is good but observations about how did I go and did I really hit the mark with our community. Her feedback is really important; really important we bounce ideas off each other and learn together.

In this experience the roles and actions reflect broad involvement, collaboration and collective responsibility for RE through reflection, dialogue and inquiry. These questions described by REC B represent a major learning agenda. They embrace issues of curriculum, instruction, management, school culture, and the larger community. They go well beyond token feedback and demonstrate that opportunities for structured conceptual discussions indicate that a principal could be both a mentor and critical friend to the REC.

As RECs are usually in the front lines of building strong RE communities, their reach extends both into the classroom and into the religious life of the parish community. Consequently, some RECs revealed a shared leadership role with the PP. One REC took comfort in the support and understanding they received from the PP when dealing with the challenges of training and supporting RE staff with limited or no knowledge in planning and conducting liturgies. In this scenario, the REC found great benefit in working closely with the PP to address this issue. When describing the evolving partnership through this mutual concern REC K stated:

I regularly debrief-with him and I feel I can tell him anything. We can banter about both the good and bad; he has to hear both sides especially when there are problems with the Mass. I view him as a friend and also professionally as my boss.

This reflective practice helped participants consider how they do things which, in turn, may lead to new and better ways of working. Regular opportunities to collaboratively reflect, discuss, analyse, plan and act may give rise to better school RE practices across the school, a mutual concern of these stakeholders. Characteristics such as collaboration (Sebba, Kent & Tregenza, 2012), reflection and active learning were identified in the literature review as essential elements to effective professional learning (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008). The findings here (and in Stage one) suggested these characteristics also apply to professional learning in the primary RE context.

In some instances the shared leadership practice was enacted very publicly. REC K spoke of his/her highest regard of their partnership with their PP in the religious life of the school and outlined how they co presented at Sacrament nights with parents. This shared leadership model provided a very explicit example to parents participating in the Sacramental program. This partnership implied that leadership is an empowering process enabling others within the organisation to exercise leadership (Dimmock, 2012). Whilst this model was not

typical of the experience of others in the focus group, it was worthy of recognition as it demonstrated a positive example of shared leadership responsibility in RE to the whole school/parish community and cemented the links between school and parish.

There was also evidence of the notion of a mentor in a more traditional sense that was conducted in one school with other colleagues who are also in leadership positions. REC S reported:

We have reflective partners who observe how things are going and then give feedback. We consider how things are going, what we can improve. They feed back that went well this is what I would suggest next time. It's been really helpful to assist me to grow and develop in my role.

This response demonstrated that mentors can help school communities raise their own questions and support one another in finding answers or approaches to address the confounding issues of RE leadership practice. The increasing emphasis on mentoring, coaching and shadowing type programs and approaches to professional learning was discussed in the literature review (Boyd, 2008). The development of professional relationships by a willingness and eagerness to learn from others was prevalent in a recent Australian RE study into the professional standards for Graduate RE teachers (Engebretson & Grajczonek, 2012). The findings of this study indicated that a willing, knowledgeable and approachable mentor who helps and guides an REC's leadership development can legitimately help fill in the blanks between theoretical knowledge and practical know-how.

Summary of this category

Whilst category one extrapolated that professional learning needs to be led purposefully (Degenhardt & Duignan, 2010), this should be achieved within an environment organised for shared responsibility, critical thinking and planning for improved student outcomes in RE. Leadership is the professional work of everyone in the school. An understanding that learning and leading are firmly linked in educational communities is an essential step to building shared leadership capacity. In this category it was apparent that opportunities to operate collaboratively, reciprocally and meaningfully with various key RE stakeholders can build even further on the strong commitment for quality in RE teaching and leadership. Further, shared leadership aims to increase retention of RECs by providing much needed emotional and professional support to them in their role.

Insights about the use of distributed leadership and sharing influences and responsibility generated a more powerful and sustainable commitment to student learning. Such sentiments may prompt schools to consider how the role of the REC, in particular, is affected and changed as leadership is more widely shared within the organization. These positive examples of shared leadership justify the need to invest more fully in building/developing the leadership capacity of RECs in partnership with other key stakeholders. This may take preparation, prudence and persistence, combined with a high degree of reciprocal trust to negotiate successfully the fault lines of formal and informal leadership practice.

Category Three: Staff Understanding and Engagement in RE

Findings from the focus groups demonstrated that RECs' professional worlds are shaped by many factors which include characteristics of their RE staff. An RE staff member's personal attributes and enthusiasm are important motivators of learning in addition to each teacher's professional aptitude. In addition RE teachers' individual beliefs, attitudes, personal and professional values embedded in and expressed in their behaviours were also cited as significant elements which enhanced the RECs leadership of professional learning. REC G noted:

A diversity of teachers and teacher knowledge, where they are at can show huge diversity and how do you marry that up together, be true to the work/demands of the Church and be true to the world and also meet the needs of the people in front of you that is what I have to do.

Professional learning success demands an appreciation and understanding of RE staff needs. This contention was reiterated by REC D who shared: "Sometimes impetus for change comes from the teachers as they find it so hard, they are pushing uphill to help children learn, trying to help children to understand the RE concepts and then they reach out for help". This story highlights that the personal motivation of the RE teacher to want to learn more could lead to recognition of their own need for further professional learning in RE. As learners, teachers need to participate in learning with a sense of ownership and desire. "Only a person who cares about something has, as it were, invested in it" (Hoveid & HonerodHoveid, 2008, p. 132). RECs agreed that the higher the degree of staff collegiality, responsibility and receptiveness to the RE domain of learning the better the results for the REC in any professional learning initiatives.

RECs revealed that conversations with RE staff that provided feedback that they had really connected with staff learning needs were particularly affirming. These conversations provided additional motivation for them in their role. These sentiments were emphasised by REC G: “Getting positive feedback from staff is really supportive and makes me go a bit further the next time”. Overall RECs spoke of the value of getting to know and understand their RE staff, and creating trust and relationships which could maximize the conditions for effective professional learning to occur. This may be viewed as building social capital which has been defined in this study as social relations and networks based on trust and reciprocity. Supporting the literature it becomes evident that the capacity to share values and interests enables a community, in this study the Catholic schools’ RE community, to develop strong bonds and a high level of trust among individuals within the community (Bergstrom et al., 1995; Timperley et al., 2008).

Summary of this category

Whilst ideas about ways to encourage and support classroom teachers’ professional learning are numerous and diverse, a sharpened focus on RE teachers’ individual needs, attitudes, and learning is necessary if RECs are to engage with RE staff in a constructive and realistic manner. Understanding the needs and expectations of RE staff and fostering relationships with them can help the REC in facilitating professional learning. Understanding specific needs can also help promote ownership of professional learning which is essential for positive impact (Timperley et al., 2008). In turn RECs must build their confidence in knowing how to promote professional learning, contribute to professional learning and respond to RE staff requests in professional learning.

Category Four: RECs’ ongoing Personal and Professional Learning

Category four, the RECs’ ongoing personal and professional learning, was a common refrain of support to RECs in their role of supporting professional learning in their schools. RECs provided realistic and deeply informed advocacy about the importance of valuing and modeling their own need for ongoing personal and professional learning typified by the following comment:

When planning with staff I am always humble and have been known to say “I don’t know or I would not have a clue” and staff recognize that we are all learning and we can learn from others’ knowledge. The Greek orthodox girls teach me how they fast, and the other teachers see me learning and hopefully appreciate we are all learning together (REC K).

This category had many sub-categories which the RECs insisted helped them to establish and sustain their credibility.

The need for ongoing learning in RE was advocated by REC B who declared “For myself as a leader, I know I need further learning and study”. REC S concurred: “Yes I agree enriching your learning with courses, speakers, a general awareness of what is around [in RE] is really important”. These arguments were typical of the commitments of REC participants to strive to regularly improve themselves in their role as REC and to model a commitment to LLL. An acknowledgement of the value of LLL has long been recognized as a powerful stimulus for teachers’ learning. This finding replicates the learning cycle (cf., Chapter two) and indicated that this premise is central to any efforts to improve staff and student learning in the field of RE.

REC D stated “In RE it is more accepted that you do have to have street cred’ [credibility] and keep improving yourself but you have to keep at it and it can be tiring”. This responsibility according to the focus groups was achieved from both a personal and professional perspective.

From a personal viewpoint, the religious upbringing, background and commitment of the REC was cited as a key support to their leadership role. REC B elucidated:

your own knowledge, experience, the family you grew up in, your passion, these internal supports, if you are confident in what you feel, believe without being pious that is a great grounding to come from. There is recognition by others that you are equipped to deal with the situations you may face.

This response was representative of others. All within the focus groups could readily provide personal examples of the advantages of personal formation aided and sustained by a strong Catholic family life. However this finding must also be considered in light of the changing practice of religious commitment (cf., Chapter one) and should not be considered as applying universally to all RECs.

A commitment to ongoing professional learning was readily modelled and proclaimed by all participants. REC B stated: “I need resourcing and reading, I am effective as an RE leader if I keep learning and I love to pass it on”. In response to this comment REC M interjected: “I agree we must keep learning”.

RECs tended to use three primary sources in their acquisition of further professional knowledge to support them in their role: a.) Written materials such as journals and database articles; b.) Formal education programs such as Masters Programs in RE; Leadership or Theology, and c.) Informal interactions with other REC colleagues. In relation to written material professional journals were commonly viewed as beneficial to the role. REC S shared: “Of course the normal magazines, professional readings, you do, like *The Summit*, *Liturgy news*, *Kairos*, etc”. This list was extended by other participants who immediately chimed in with other examples of scholarly journals and material they found useful. These sources provided ideas, inspiration and guidance to RECs as they support classroom teachers to achieve quality RE.

Formal study was common to all RECs and one, REC G, advocated: “our study – post graduate study particularly, certainly contributed to my own knowledge base and ability to deliver PD at our school”. Other participants agreed that academic study, whilst increasing competence, had the added advantage of improving confidence. REC K testified:

I really got something out of it [formal study] to take back to the classrooms or to better work with parents. I would highly recommend it especially if you get support from the CEO. They supported me fully and were very generous to me I got twenty days study leave and financial support.

Some RECs also valued the opportunity to meet with other people in order not only to ‘stock up’ with ideas to try out in the RE classroom but to gain support in more sophisticated ways. Exploring how learning and instructional leadership can become fused into professional practice was evidenced by REC D:

I find great support from other RECs, sharing frustrations and problems. Not swapping Masses, but a deeper level of talking, more than just can we talk about lessons concepts, but more like how can we approach pedagogy with teachers and deciding how to do that at a deeper level? Really deliberating how do we get kids to this deeper level too?”

This comment indicated that building on existing connections or clusters to create networks of learners and learning can be another effective method of furthering the RECs' leadership, professional knowledge and skills. This networking and interacting with REC colleagues provided access to resources, advice and a "bank" of professional supports to enhance leadership of learning in RE. These exchanges, discussions and supports provided opportunities to nurture, promote and stimulate RECs as leaders or aspirant leaders, whilst simultaneously supporting and promoting the professional growth of colleagues.

Participants in the focus groups valued opportunities to work and learn within formal networks such as professional associations as well as within informal opportunistic collegial networks. The support from associations with other RECs was highly valued. REC K confirmed:

.... (RECs) have a wealth of experience and expertise to share, real gifts but we never have time to do this. We must stop to ask "What are we on about? How can we nurture each other's spirit?"

Networks of colleagues with similar interests, roles and responsibilities were viewed as a critical means of knowledge transmission that allowed practitioner knowledge to be exchanged and built on a perceived trustworthy base. The power of collegial networks to facilitate and support professional learning was evident but, more than this, the strong peer based learning provided opportunities for RECs to network with other teachers in a similar position in other schools so that leadership learning could take place. Dialogue and reflection with others in similar position helped participants to decide the appropriate application of their leadership skills and abilities. The possibility to use local personnel with shared interests, based on a growing understanding of the distinctiveness of RE leadership in Catholic primary schools helps build capacity among people throughout schools, the local sector and the system as a whole. In addition, many of the supports expressed in this category were almost identical to those articulated by the classroom teachers and RECs' survey responses, especially in relation to the benefits of further formal study.

Summary of this category

Access to contemporary RE resources, expert advice and formal and informal associations of RECs make important contributions to REC professionalism. RECs make valuable contacts, develop relationships, exchange information/resources and link with colleagues outside the

school environment with similar interests/needs, thereby providing much needed collegial support. The establishment of an ongoing range of personal and professional development opportunities for RECs as leaders is an essential ingredient in the provision of quality RE schooling (Keating, 2004). Within this category it is recognised that individual development needs will vary with experience and context throughout a REC school leader's career journey.

Category Five: Structural and systems supports

Many RECs stressed the intimate connection between establishing conditions for individual RE teachers to learn and share within the school organization and the benefits to the school as a whole. A catalyst for turning this individual learning into organizational learning according to the focus groups was enabling the conditions whereby RE teachers can regularly meet. In these meetings RE staff can master content skills, evaluate their own and their students' performance, and address changes needed in teaching and learning in RE in their schools. RECs argued strongly, that with an assurance of times/structures/resources and situated learning, RE staff felt more motivated and committed to work consciously to monitor their RE professional practices and update their skills and knowledge in order to remain competent and confident in their RE teaching. This understanding was postulated by REC K: "Real professional learning happens through conversation and dialogue and these must be structured, regular and valued". The transcripts of the focus groups provided various examples where, according to the RECs, structural and system supports helped staff to be more proactive, willing participants in RE professional learning. The extent to which leadership provided a sense of order through the provision and enforcement of clear structures, routines, and procedures for RE staff was pivotal to the success of professional learning initiatives in RE. Typically these were described as a cyclical structure which enabled teachers and the REC as learners to establish contextual insights about the learning as it occurs.

Literature cited in Chapter two of this thesis provided evidence that some professional learning in its current state is poorly conceived and deeply flawed as the support and training teachers receive is episodic, myopic and often meaningless (Darling Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). The recommendation from the focus groups, that schools should provide time/space/protocols for professional learning was therefore of great consequence. Whilst consensus certainly did not exist about the specifics of these supports,

some RECs argued that there is an urgent need for mandated guidelines which can be applied at the local level to protect these valuable structural and system supports. REC K proposed:

I believe there should be a professional responsibility for classroom teachers to complete professional learning in RE. I wonder should there be a requirement of a set amount of hours given to RE professional learning like at least 1 day/2 days a year perhaps?

REC M agreed with this sentiment:

In my view it [professional learning] needs a higher profile from the Archdiocese or CEO system, if not Principals must provide this. It really needs to be valued across the board, we don't tend to make too many demands of [RE] teachers but perhaps they need some demands. Like maybe a minimum of 5 outside hours per term where you choose from a range of options of professional learning like twilights at a central location where you just learn RE with no assessment. It is just enjoyable and of use to your RE class.

Other RECs specified directed professional learning requirements which were conditional upon participation in projects in other key learning areas and questioned why these stipulations were not applicable to RE. REC K highlighted the importance of school structures which allocated both time and personnel for the provision of structured professional learning:

Allocated time with teachers is really crucial, we really get into the readings, discussion, reflection and honesty comes out and I feel as if I am robbed if it is cut down because I lose the rich discussion and learning that takes place.

This reflection left no room for doubt that structural supports enabled effective professional learning to occur at this primary school. This contention also supports the arguments of Hoban (2002) who claimed that schools like other workplaces must become sophisticated professional learning systems that are organised and structured to encourage professional learning for staff so that it becomes an endemic part of their work.

Summary of this category

All participants to date have sent a clear signal of the high regard in which they hold system and structural supports which encourage and promote RE staff professional learning. Given that the professional learning practices of Australian teachers have been criticised as ineffective (Fishman et al., 2003), this finding highlights that it is imperative that RE professional learning be better understood in order that school and school systems can

provide relevant and timely structures and support. There was ample data to illustrate that the provision of ongoing structural or system supports in various guises served to empower individuals and educational teams within the Catholic primary school. In turn, this built the capacity of RE teachers to improve the RE curriculum and affect student learning in RE.

Summary of supports for the REC in their leadership role in RE professional learning and the implications for this research

The RECs who took part in the focus groups provided a rich and multifaceted description of their leadership role in professional learning. Among the RECs, their role in supporting/leading professional learning appeared to be understood quite differently. Whilst arguably RECs have always had and accepted an element of religious leadership within their role, the focus group findings indicated there are clear differences of understandings and expectations regarding the leadership dimension of the RECs role within different primary contexts. These differences were evident in a number of ways and to a great extent on the degree of support they received. Whilst some findings in this category provided illuminating examples of what can be achieved with passion and vision combined with adequate support and resources, high levels of synchronisation of all these key aspects was not always evident. The focus groups' data provided various positive examples of the conditions that need to be in place if professional learning in RE is to make a difference to student learning in RE. These findings provided stimulus to explore future possibilities and opportunities to leverage strengths to operate as effectively as possible for the betterment of RE students and the school community.

As this data was grounded in evidence, these categories moved beyond abstraction to concrete responsibilities, practices, knowledge, strategies, tools and resources that RE leaders needed to be effective leaders of professional learning. The categories can become a tool that will help leaders and leadership teams add value to the work of all stakeholders to improve student learning in RE. These findings recognised an overriding importance of the *leadership* role and practice of the REC in partnership with other key leaders in RE. The data recognised that there was a substantial relationship between leadership and the impact of RE professional learning. After analysing focus group data questions in regards to RE leadership are associated with effective RE professional learning implementation and deserve and require further attention.

Principals' Focus Group

As has been discussed earlier in this chapter in Stage two, two focus groups were conducted with RECs to obtain their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes about leading RE professional learning. These recorded conversations helped to ascertain supports which would assist RECs in this key responsibility. As the focus groups were conducted with RECs from different regions of the Melbourne Archdiocese the different focus groups ensured that a range of perspectives from the Melbourne Archdiocese was gathered and analysed so that rich data was obtained. However, as RECs work closely with principals and have shared responsibility for staff and student learning in RE, it was appropriate to conduct a focus group with principals from the Northern and Western Regions too. The focus group conducted with principals served to identify supports from another relevant leadership perspective. As some categories had already been established from the focus groups from RECs, the researcher decided to highlight the similarities and differences in the information gathered from the principals.

The experience and perspectives from the principals from the Western and Northern regions in the focus group pointed to some clear similarities in the views expressed by the RECs in relation to the supports in regards to the leading of professional learning in RE. As has been previously the case in this research, segments of the actual data are presented in the form of vignettes and quotes which provide useful explanatory material. It is anticipated that this material helps the reader form a judgement about how well the theory is grounded in the data.

A summary table indicating the parallels between the RECs and principals in relation to the factors which support the REC to lead professional learning in RE is presented next in Table 5.4. This table contains an illustrative comment from the principals to substantiate the alignment that occurred.

Table 5.4.

Summary of alignment between RECs and Principals focus group responses about the factors which support the leadership role of the REC in professional learning.

KEY ✓ _ indicates agreement demonstrated in statements from Principal focus groups

Differences are noted in RED

Summary of the categories	Summary of the sub categories	Illustrative comment from Principal demonstrating alignment in understanding
Shared advocacy and commitment to RE✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal ✓ Leadership Teams✓ Parish priest✓ 	“RE must have leadership time given although not 2 IC it must be given adequate support. (P, J). They need the principals’ support, they need to know you are with them in carrying out their role” (P, M).
Shared leadership✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentoring✓ Coaching ✓ Feedback 	<p>“Our PP and my REC discuss a lot of things and make decisions and if collaboratively they make RE decisions and then tell me, I am quite happy about that and that shared leadership is great”.</p> <p>“We have a very involved PP when we go away as a staff for PL and stuff in RE he always comes and contributes positively to professional learning” (P, B).</p>
Staff understanding and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal knowledge Personal affiliation 	NOT MENTIONED BY PRINCIPALS
RECs ongoing personal and professional learning✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upbringing, nurturing of faith Written materials to update knowledge, skills ✓ Formal education programs✓ Informal interactions. Networking with RECs ✓ 	“My two most recent RECs have done their Masters so that they have been learning themselves a lot about what they can do and what they learn there (university) they seem to bring back to our school. That is extremely fortunate as we have less input or need for external people as the REC is more knowledgeable and confident in their role and honestly they bring back great stuff to support staff professional learning needs” (P, B).
Structural/ System supports✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocated Time ✓ Release✓ Funding✓ (P) RESOURCES 	<p>“Time is a big thing- well mine gets 2 half days a week so she has time to complete the things she needs to do in her role. If she needs more time we give it to her. So it is a matter of allowing the time she needs if she wants to plan PD with staff or needs more planning time we try within reason to accommodate this need ”(P, M).</p> <p>“They must have support especially with resources and time” (P, J).</p>
CAPACITY BUILDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNDERSTANDING (P) ENACTING (P) 	“RECs can not to do everything themselves they have to appreciate the need to build the capacity of RE staff and provide ways to enable this” (P, D).

Whilst the points of similarity have been established it was also necessary to consider the additional support factors mentioned by principals but not by RECs and these included the following categories:

New Subcategory: Resources

Resources was another subcategory identified by principals as advantageous to the REC in their leadership of professional learning. Principal D stated:

If RECs are to encourage contemporary learning and teaching in RE and challenge RE staff to improve their teaching of RE to benefit students, they need access to high quality, contemporary innovative RE resources which can reinforce the professional learning they are trying to achieve.

Other principals nodded in support of this contention. This contention was supported by the findings of classroom teachers (cf., Chapter four) and signals a shared concern for any professional learning endeavours in RE to access contemporary resources to encourage innovation and improved teaching practice.

Another point of differentiation from RECs was that principals spoke of the need for the leadership team and especially the REC to value and enact the understanding of capacity building.

New Category: Capacity building

Principals argued that if capacity building was understood and enacted the REC would be supported in their leadership of professional learning. The attempts to bring learning and leading closer together were exemplified by principal D:

Our school very much has a vision of building the capacity of all our staff and this perspective I believe, supports the REC in their role as they are an agent of change, but it is only by working with and for staff members, to help them to be part of the change and take ownership for the direction we are moving in that change or improvement will occur. RECs can help change teachers' attitudes, to see themselves as leaders.

This response resonated very much with a contemporary understanding of a leadership role prevalent in the work of Lambert (2002). Such sentiments recognised that teachers should be encouraged, energised and empowered to take responsibility in their own context for teaching and learning in their classroom/schools. Fullan (2004) also asserted that school leaders have a

responsibility to develop leaders within their school and referred to the process as building a system's capacity.

This broader style of leadership has implications for Catholic primary schools. No longer should they concern or confine themselves with the role or decisions of the REC but rather it may be necessary to capitalise on the talent and potential of RE staff and to encourage them to assume leadership in curriculum development and student learning in RE. Such findings are consistent with those from O' Brien (2006; 2007) who cautioned that "the concept of teachers leading in their professional practice is yet to gain rightful status" (2007, p. 2). This call for capacity building may demand a realignment of power and authority to invest in the development of RE staff.

Summary of the principals' perspective of the factors which support the leadership role of the REC in professional learning.

The findings that emerged from the focus group of principals showed a degree of commonality with those that emerged from the RECs focus groups. Many perceptions confirmed the categories suggested by the RECs as factors which support them in their role of leading professional learning in the Catholic primary context. On the other hand, for some categories there was not agreement, or the principals' data extended some of the categories established by the RECs. These diverse considerations leave RE stakeholders with a complex picture. One cannot presuppose a confluence of the components which support the REC. However insights provided by principals and RECs assist stakeholders to know and better understand all the factors which can enable the REC to grow and provide positive leadership to RE professional learning endeavors in the primary school context. The supports affirmed and extended by principals reiterate the need to harness and apply these learnings in a practical context.

Summary of Stage Two Findings – Part one

The focus groups provided a valuable forum where a range of views and ideas was sought from a group of stakeholders (RECs and principals). The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the influences which affect the REC in their work of leading professional learning in Catholic primary school settings. This enabled testimony of their experiences in professional

learning and identified the strengths which support this leadership role. The findings provided many provocative insights yet confirmed that some leaders within Catholic schools in partnership with RECs were committed to improving the quality of RE teaching in their schools and to recognising, celebrating and sharing quality RE teaching practice. This was achieved by promoting and supporting formal and informal professional learning opportunities.

Summary of this Chapter

As the data was collected, analysed and interpreted a number of key themes and sub themes emerged. Key findings from stage two of the research highlighted particular realities for RECs in exercising leadership of professional learning. There was ample evidence that positive perceptions resulted from RECs who are provided with support to lead professional learning. The focus group provided some examples of schools that placed a particular emphasis upon generating a culture of shared learning through formal and informal opportunities within, across and beyond the school context.

The leadership role of the REC in professional learning may need to be reconsidered, puzzled over and reconceptualised to suit the conditions and circumstances in which it is exercised, however one prerequisite is essential; a central responsibility of all responsible for leadership in Catholic primary school must be to understand and be able to lead others to understand the importance of RE within the Catholic school. On the practical side a theory may be needed to explain how stakeholders are experiencing the phenomenon of leadership of professional learning and the grounded theory developed by the researcher will provide such a general framework.

Theoretical Proposition about Stage Two Findings

In light of this display and the discussion of findings thus far, the chapter concludes by offering the following theoretical propositions:

Theoretical proposition: Leadership of learning in RE is a collective responsibility. All leaders in RE must have sufficient commitment to and confidence in the priority of RE within the Catholic primary school and as a result must have as their core focus leadership learning in RE. Improving RE outcomes for students is a key reason to engage in professional learning and correspondingly should be the basis for judging its success. Extended and frequent opportunities to learn and practice informally and formally must be provided as a core school business. This theoretical proposition does not preclude RE staff seeking learning opportunities beyond a particular school.

It is not possible to determine what is working well and not working so well without adopting a deeply evaluative stance to all RE professional learning activities. Therefore all those involved in the shared leadership of RE need to work at creating and maintaining bonds of mutual concern, trust, respect and openness to give and receive criticism about the effectiveness of RE professional learning initiatives.

A wide range of factors can affect the potential impact of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. The leadership role of the REC in professional learning is, to a great or lesser extent shaped and influenced by dynamic organisational and cultural factors within the school community.

A commitment to growing and developing leadership practice results in deeper understandings of the processes and conditions that encourage individual and school wide professional learning.

Conclusion to the Chapter

The differential impact of leadership.

As the overarching exploration of this study considers the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in Catholic primary schools to enhance staff and student learning, the results of the focus groups were of great relevance to this study. As important as the previous findings were, there is another finding that is equally important to this study. That is, just as RECs can be supported in their leadership role, it is equally important to identify considerations that challenge their leadership of professional learning and consequently may limit or retard staff and student learning in RE. The following chapter presents the findings of the focus groups of both RECs and principals in relation to the challenges of leading professional learning in the Catholic primary context.

CHAPTER SIX: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS STAGE TWO- PART TWO

Introduction to the Chapter

The previous chapter, focused on Stage two, part one of the data, identifying factors which strengthen the leadership capacity of those responsible for professional learning in RE namely RECs. This chapter presents the findings in relation to part two of Stage two and draws on the results generated from focus groups with RECs and principals. In doing so the chapter addresses the next research question:

According to key stakeholders what factors challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?

The data consists of responses from focus groups with RECs and principals from the Northern and Western regions of the Melbourne Archdiocese. The spectrum of views gathered provided a valuable means to seek a deeper understanding, to explore the nuances of the leadership experiences of professional learning in RE and to extract a degree of detail not available by quantification. Five major challenges emerged from the data giving insights into the challenges which may inhibit the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. These factors are presented and analyzed and key implications are noted. The chapter concludes by presenting further theoretical propositions with respect to the challenges of leading professional learning in RE in Catholic primary schools.

Participants

The composition of the focus groups was identified in the previous chapter. The RECs and principals who took part in the focus groups openly discussed their perceptions of the challenges associated with leading professional learning in Catholic primary schools. The reflections suggested that key challenges identified in the literature review continue to emerge and some longstanding issues have morphed into more complicated forms.

Challenges of Leading Professional Learning.

An extensive interpretation of the data in relation to challenges about leadership of professional learning is considered in this section. There was consistency between the initial findings from the REC survey data (presented in Chapter four) and a deeper reflection of the realities and challenges RECs face in their leadership role of professional learning which emerged from the focus group discussions. A summary of the findings reported in the focus groups of RECs is presented in Table 6.1. *Challenges to the leadership role of the REC in Professional Learning in RE.* Table 6.1. indicates general agreement among the participants as to which barriers presented major challenges to leadership of professional learning in RE.

Table 6.1.
Challenges to the leadership role of the REC in Professional Learning in RE.

Category	Sub Category	Illustrative example provided from participant
Lack of leadership status and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal from leadership team • Reduction in focus, status, financial remuneration 	"It really needs to be valued across the board, if we are to succeed" (REC M).
Relationship with and expectations of the PP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding of educational role • Tensions associated with being an advocate for teachers deficiencies in liturgy, knowledge, etc. 	"Sometimes I feel that our Priest evaluates the Mass and grades teachers on their ability to plan and present a Mass whilst we are focusing on a more educational perspective" (REC G).
Diversity of teacher knowledge, affiliation and commitment to RE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff motivation/attitudes • Staff qualifications/experience • Staff commitment/ability to participate effectively in religious responsibilities within the school 	"Sometimes I feel like I am moderating, I take the RE faith and moderate it for teachers and even parents in our community but I recognize that I must continue to move them in the right direction We must find different starting points in the classroom, teachers often lack background like the parts of the Mass for instance"(REC G).
Prohibitive school structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time • Structures • Resources • Space 	"I get support to a degree but other business and other pressures have taken over" (REC D).
Demands and tensions of varying expectations of role.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational v's Ecclesial, administration, formation. 	"I am most wanted & needed when teachers plan a Mass" (REC D).

Category One: Lack of leadership status and support

There was consensus that a distinctive but significant challenge with profound implications for the future leadership role of the REC was related to the status and support provided to the REC from the principal and the school's leadership team in general. As has been identified in the previous chapter, just as leaders can have a positive impact on the RECs role in regards to leadership of professional learning, they can also have a marginal, or worse, a negative impact on the RECs role in general. Educators have long known intuitively that school leadership makes a difference. Despite all the research and scholarly material confirming the importance of leadership support for the REC to operate effectively (Buchanan, 2010; Dowling, 2011; Healy, 2011), this category provided evidence that the leadership role of the REC not only could not be optimized without the necessary status and support from the principal (and leadership team), but some data indicated that it can regress.

When discussing the impact of this challenge REC D shared: "Now it (leadership) is a struggle, there has been a change in our leadership team and I am not on the leadership team at the moment". That an REC was not a member of a school leadership team within a Catholic school was a cause of concern for all the other RECs in the focus group, as is illustrated by the immediate reaction to this comment. Interrupting this story another REC, K, exclaimed: "That is insulting!" whilst other participants expressed amazement and nodded their heads in agreement with the sentiments expressed. At this point other REC participants commented on the perceived injustice and ramifications of this situation. This organizational structure and leadership culture (i.e., omission from the leadership team) can result in the REC feeling invalidated and powerless. REC D also outlined some consequences of this change in regard to structure and support with the following comments:

With the restructure, when I do go there (leadership team meetings) I go with RE business but I feel limited to discussing RE as an area of learning when it is far more than that. I sometimes feel the discussion is too wishy washy, and I think what are our core values? I cannot continually keep attention on established RE goals if I am not part of regular leadership decision making.

By not being a part of the leadership team, REC D expressed that he/she was no longer in a position to be an advocate or representative for the essential role of RE within the school. This inadvertently limited their sphere of influence to foster the RE culture within the school community and to work closely with staff and the school community to develop a shared

vision of RE. If, as in this case, the REC is unable to properly identify and focus leadership on improving RE within the school, it becomes difficult to protect aspects of the RE culture, values and norms which Catholic schools claim are worth preserving. This situation, although isolated, demonstrated that the leadership role of the REC is far from constant and the impact of the role is inextricably linked to the direct support received from leadership teams, in particular the principal.

Any apparent disregard for the status of the RE within the school poses a challenge for all those who take seriously the need to establish and preserve the Catholic identity of the school. The arguments presented in Chapter one (CECV, 2005; Neidhart & Carlin, 2011) pointed to the importance of valuing, preserving and understanding the role of RE within the Catholic primary school, and this finding is at odds with this important goal.

Serious challenges occur to the perception of RE leadership if school leadership is not able to protect RECs from issues and influences which detract from their leadership role or educational focus. According to RECs, lack of leadership status and support meant that they could not be prominent in their field or spheres of influence. This was especially so in regard to enhancing the quality of teaching, learning and student outcomes in RE. The RECs in the focus groups reported on several occasions, that their educational and leadership role was not always valued by members of the school community to the same extent, REC M shared:

In the past I have worked with RE teams and you don't realise how good they are until you don't have them. At my current school we do not have teams at all and that means it all comes back to me and that can be difficult as I don't have all the ideas.

This research has revealed that there are now numerous examples of poor educational practice being implemented, some under the guise and rhetoric of RE leadership, others openly degrading the position by omitting it from the school's leadership structure. Unfortunately, it is impossible to assess readily the extent of this. However, evidence from the surveys, combined with reports from RECs participating in the focus groups, indicated that there is much progress to be made in assisting RECs to work optimally in schools. Further, it is possible to sense the potential for some conflict in the direction or goals of RE within the school if, RECs are not able to witness in deeds to the high ideals established for RE.

Some of the RECs noted that there can be an assumption that a leadership role will be automatically and consistently assigned and applied to the REC role and this has been shown not to be the case. A number of problems have arisen from a difference between the leadership title of the REC and its enactment. RECs' testimonials suggested that there were a variety of reasons for this. Because of the nature of the problems and the need to protect the individuals concerned these issues are presented in a generalized form, however, the inherent tension from the lack of leadership support became immediately apparent. The experience of REC B supported this argument: "Whilst the leadership team may be well intentioned, these sometimes do not come to fruition and RE suffers".

A consequence of this challenge was that at least some Catholic schools may have moved backwards in the leadership dimension of the role which RECs directly attribute to the lack of support from those in leadership positions. The challenge of lack of leadership support was not isolated to the principals. Generally RECs expressed dissatisfaction when they perceived their leadership role was diminished in any way (i.e. it was not fully supported by their own school leadership team or by "the system"). When participants coined the phrase "system" they were referring to the central regulatory authority in this instance the CEOM. The focus group discussions elicited other specific examples of leadership diminishing the role. These perceptions included reducing the status of the role by dropping the POL level, deliberately narrowing the focus of the role or reducing the allocation of time/funding given to the role, to cite but a few. These factors were identified as symptoms of lack of leadership support for the REC role which, in turn, challenged the status of the role.

Many participants were especially incensed by a recent decision by the CEOM, which reduced the remuneration and designated POL status of the position for those RECs who satisfied the criteria previously outlined in the Draft Policy 2.22. RECs claimed that CEOM staff provided official endorsement by unofficially changing the title of REC to RE leader which on the one hand, could be seen to elevate the status of the role. According to participants this change in terminology was used frequently by regional CEO staff but not necessarily in written documentation. Paradoxically the Policy was terminated (which allegedly changed the pay and status arrangements for some RECs). The focus group participants universally regarded this decision as a major "setback" to their leadership role. In their opinion the decision indicated a distinct lack of support and regard for the RECs leadership role. One participant, REC Y was particularly exasperated: "This change showed

an utter disregard to the school communities affected by these changes”. Confusion and angst was evidenced in the participants discussions. RECs argued that on the surface a change in the title of the role was positive however, this was undermined, or nullified by a reduction in the remuneration and status allocated to the role.

Whilst the participants were keen to highlight that the difference in money was not the main issue, it was the potential for the leadership role to go backward in some schools which was of real concern. It was identified that one REC was no longer part of the leadership team whilst others cited examples of a reduction in the level of POL, or a reduction in the time release allocated for them to complete their duties. Allegedly all these challenges could be directly attributed to the change in central policy. The CEOM change of status and remuneration for the REC role has again raised some uncomfortable truths about the support provided to the leadership role at a systems level. Ironically, this perceived challenge actually brought RECs together in their promotion of the leadership aspect of the REC role. Another participant, REC M, suggested that leadership support was a prerequisite to success in the role. He/she argued the need for an increased status at all levels of leadership influence: “It needs higher profile from Archdiocese, CEOM and principals. It really needs to be valued across the board, if we are to succeed”.

According to REC participants, their advocacy for RE can only be sustained by dedicated, justly compensated and appropriately educated leaders. RECs were adamant that they needed confident and competent leadership that not only communicates the priority of RE, but generates the necessary supports to sustain this. Without this support their function as leader was impeded or regressed.

Summary of this category

A warning has been signaled by these findings. RE has an enduring value which deserves greater support from all significant stakeholders in regard to leadership status and support. Regrettably, some of the leadership practices within Catholic primary schools were criticized as ineffective on a number of levels, when RECs were not given leadership support or the leadership supports allocated to their role were reduced. The RECs demanded that urgent attention be paid by education authorities to ensure that the REC as a leader was given due recognition and active support. Participants recommended that the CEOM provided funding certainty to the role at a time when other sources were less assured. There was a lack of

consonance between what the REC assumes is a priority and what other beliefs and practices may be. Further, one must question what implicit and explicit messages staff receive about teaching RE in this school and region when adverse leadership constrains the role of the REC. RECs in the focus groups indicated their desire to participate actively in the reshaping and reforming of their work in Catholic schools to help remediate these challenges. They advocated a need for a clear set of published criteria for RECs which could be recommended by mutual parties and evaluated on its merits at a local level.

This category underscored the difficulty of RECs trying to optimise the learning opportunities and outcomes for staff and students without the support of leaders within the school and the system at large. Competitive pressures distracted RECs from their core role to improve student learning in RE. RECs also considered that failure to encourage, facilitate and reward individual professional growth could diminish RECs level of engagement with the role and erode RECs' sense of positive identity. Two obvious consequences flow directly from the identified challenges. First RECs may lose confidence and commitment to their role or second and worse through disillusionment may walk away from their positions.

A further serious question was raised regarding the best way to strengthen the connections between RECs' participation in the leadership team and an understanding and appreciation of the core purpose of RE in Catholic schools. Whilst the contemporary, changing religious landscape makes it increasingly difficult to presume any degree of knowledge, experience and participation in the Catholic faith of those who comprise the leadership team, perhaps systemic imperatives may be required to assist all school leaders to upgrade their knowledge, skills and understanding of faith leadership in recognition of their shared and crucial role in the enterprise of Catholic education. How then can schools and the system authorities work together to meet this important challenge? On the evidence presented so far more needs to be done and in some instances it is unclear whether the two can come together on these issues of strong mutual concern. This question goes to the heart of the issue of religious leadership which is a focus of this research.

Category Two: Relationship with and Expectations of the PP

As the REC role involves regular communications and ongoing dealing with the PP understandably this was viewed as an essential element of their role. While the extent of this relationship varied from school to school, the quality of this relationship was an influential

factor in the success or otherwise of the REC's leadership role. Focus group participants indicated that the PP's appreciation and understanding of the educational role of RE varied from context to context. Some PPs' lack of understanding of contemporary education proved challenging for RECs. This detrimental influence was evident when REC M stated: "Our new priest, no offence, has really made my role challenging as he has little knowledge and understanding of education." It was not surprising, therefore that pressures relating to lack of educational understanding were experienced most acutely by RECs who, aside from the principal, were often the ones most directly and regularly in contact with the PP. REC G explained: "What he demands of classroom teachers may be different to what we hope to empower in staff and students". This comment highlighted a difference between the expectations of the REC and PP (similar to the past research of Tinsey, 1999) which caused undue pressures.

Ideally RE positions require people who are faith filled, theologically educated and educationally and pastorally skilled. The reality, as has already been shown in chapter four of this thesis, is that this is not necessarily the case. That some RE staff may be deficient in the aforementioned areas was confronting and problematic for some PPs. The focus group discussion indicated that this frustration in turn placed undue pressure on the REC. There was concern expressed about perceived lack of expertise of RE staff particularly in matters pertaining to liturgy where an apparent perception existed among some PPs that many teachers (and senior leaders according to one REC) do not have and cannot attain the knowledge and skills required to do their job effectively.

It was apparent that some clergy see the primary role of the REC as the faith development of staff. One participant indicated their PP had little tolerance for RE staff who did not have adequate skills, knowledge or interest/practice in the Catholic tradition. REC G claimed "Sometimes the priest evaluates the Mass and grades teachers on their ability to plan and present a Mass". The PP then raised his concerns directly with the REC. In response to this scenario, the focus group participants were in agreement that expectations of the REC to respond to and assume full authority for the successful outcomes of school liturgies seemed unreasonable. They indicated that this was a real source of considerable tension for some RECs and a challenge which must be addressed. This sentiment was evidenced in the following comment from REC D: "At one Mass at every mistake, I had to get up and fix things but it was not my mistake!"

A default expectation that the REC will compensate for responsibilities left unattended by classroom teachers and the inflated expectation that the REC be involved in every aspect of the religious life of the school, in some instances, led to frustration. Moreover, it reflected a model of leadership contrary to a distributed model. Instead of empowering and slowly building the capacity of classroom teachers to understand, learn and apply liturgical skills for themselves, they may become reliant and dependent on the REC who, in some instances, felt compelled to compensate for staff lack of knowledge/skills.

Some RECs expressed concerns about having to explain or represent the concerns of the teachers to the PP, and whilst operating within the parameters of an employer/employee relationship. An important finding was that there was a difference in opinion between some PPs and RECs about the significance of staff faith to RE teachers' role in the school. This could become a contentious issue for RECs to defend or explain and was, on occasion, detrimental to the relationship between these two key stakeholders.

This tension was highlighted by REC M who described a scenario that occurred during a whole school Mass. In an effort to collaboratively assist students at an Ash Wednesday Mass he/she asked the leadership team to help monitor students in their assigned roles in the liturgy. However, a leadership team member needed to rely on another staff member because they did know the parts of the Mass. REC M stated "So herein is my challenge even with good and supportive leadership and RE staff, the knowledge base is not always there and certainly the faith practice is not there". Within the succinct but rich description of this issue it became apparent that when inadvertent errors occurred within the liturgy, the mistakes are very public. Consequently some RECs felt undue responsibility to explain and compensate for these errors to the PP. These realities created tensions and indicated a need for a PP who is attuned to the various challenges that Catholic schools face in these changing times. There is a need for all religious leaders to situate themselves within the tensions and realities and yet collaboratively empower staff grounded in the best of the past yet acutely attuned to the challenging obstacles that accompany the realities of RE staff lives.

Summary of this category

This category reinforced the need for the PP to have realistic expectations of the RECs role and influence specific to the perceived deficiencies of different staff members. It pointed to

the need for PPs who can work in partnership with the REC to build confidence, trust and support for the RE staff. Further, it highlighted the need for the PP and REC to work amicably to discover ways to inspire commitment, foster creativity and stimulate achievement in all RE staff, whilst recognizing and understanding their diverse needs/interests and abilities. An implication of this category is that without the support understanding and backing of the PP, some RECs may feel thwarted and impeded in their efforts to improve the quality of RE in the school community. Previous studies (Buchanan 2010; 2007; Crotty, 2005; Healy, 2011) have highlighted a concern for support of the principal however this category differs as it points to a need for a positive relationship combined with realistic expectations of a PP.

Whilst this category very much depends on the context within which the relationship occurs, it is important to know much more about the effect and influence of the PP within Catholic school communities, as this category relied solely on the RECs' perspectives. In addition, there needs to be more understanding of the reason for any underlying differences in stakeholders' positions on any one issue. Further dialogue is needed to better understand and appreciate these different perspectives and find ways to strengthen the partnership and working relationships between REC, staff and PP.

Category Three: Diversity of Teachers' Knowledge, Affiliation and Commitment to RE

This next category relates closely to the previous one and reports on the challenges associated with the diversity of teachers' knowledge, affiliation and commitment to RE. The data acknowledged the critically important role of those who daily occupy the front lines of RE in the classroom. Participants argued that staff motivation, education and application have a decisive impact on leadership of RE. Some concerns centred on a perceived lack of staff commitment to some of the more traditional priorities of RE (regular prayer/liturgy/Mass). Little understanding of and respect for key elements of the school's RE program resulted in a reluctance or inability of some staff to be effectively involved in activities which provide active witness to the religious dimension of the school. Various participants (G, K, S) recalled distinct challenges such as inviting staff to lead prayer or organise a liturgy. The Church also has acknowledged increasing "religious indifference" (John Paul II, 1989, p. 4) and "abandonment of the faith" (Benedict XVI, 2010). Given the diminished connection to and engagement with the parish church community in Australia, identified in Chapter two (ACES 2007; Dixon, 2006), staff hesitancy can be understood. However, the disparity in

knowledge, motivation and commitment was a source of serious tension for RECs in their leadership role. Other studies have shown that lack of teacher knowledge, qualifications, skill, faith commitment and confidence were problematic (Buchanan, 2007, Engebretson & Grajczonek, 2012; Healy, 2011) and this tension can no longer be ignored. Further, participant claims that some staff were ambivalent, disinterested and in some instances even openly negative about RE within the school program, were not isolated.

Frustration with this negative mindset of some staff was also evident in the following comments when REC D claimed that after 4 hours preparation for the RE staff meeting a staff member audibly stated “Oh no, not RE again”. This prompts the question how do interactions with colleagues, leaders, and students strengthen or weaken RE teachers' dispositions toward students' learning in RE? Further the negative influence may have an impact on the RE teachers' motivation to continue developing as RE teachers.

Stage one and stage two findings have evidenced that RE is not valued by some staff. The cause of this is as yet unknown. Whilst mindful of this problematic attitude, it became apparent that some RECs as leaders must also realize that perhaps RE teachers need time, understanding and support to change their practice/attitudes in RE. Further, all leaders of RE must also remember that the defence mechanisms exhibited by some RE classroom teachers must be dealt with carefully to avoid needlessly distancing staff attitudes further.

One REC participant, G, suggested that giving voice to resistance and embracing contested views enabled powerful opportunities for ongoing and critical analysis of actions and helped develop shared visions of the school's RE program. A willingness to seriously consider what may be viewed as defiant behaviour and to engage RE staff in ongoing debate about key RE issues offers an alternative and potentially illuminating way of coping with this challenge.

Summary of this category

Teachers' morale and professionalism are of central concern to all school leaders but in Catholic schools these considerations must extend to RE staff in particular. Despite the call of scholars, central, local and school authorities, to rally around the quality of RE, some stakeholders including those directly involved in this pursuit, classroom teachers, expressed a persistent ambivalence about the value and priority of RE. To compound this tension, issues

of trust and confidence emerged as significant when RECs explained that they felt as if they needed to be vigilant about the credibility of RE as it affected the status of their role.

It was problematic for RECs that there was some subtle reluctance by certain staff to RE initiatives and this challenged RECs in their leadership efforts in professional learning. Even more telling were responses which reported more overt resistance which may be viewed as highly unprofessional. These realities necessitate consistent, honest and sustained dialogue among key stakeholders, combined with a collective commitment to maintain the energy and focus of all RE staff members if those genuinely seeking to improve the quality of RE want to succeed.

Category Four: Prohibitive School Structures

The focus group data indicated that the professional practice of RE teachers is profoundly influenced by the organisation within which teachers work. Comments illustrated that the organisation, design and implementation of professional learning initiatives at a school level has important ramifications. Some RECs lamented that the very structure of their schools meant that RE teachers may find it difficult to collaboratively solve the professional problems they encounter. Frustrations were likely to take many forms. Explanations for this coalesce around “we don’t have enough ‘fill in the blank’ (time, money, resources, and space). Without a designated time and vigilant support and direction to supervise and protect RE professional learning experiences, RECs explained that RE staff may have no or little opportunity for sustained study, experimentation and feedback in RE. REC D noted:

Often RE is the last week of term for our cycles of meetings, the emphasis is changing but RE is now not one of the big four and can be viewed as an add on. I believe it should be RE, Literacy, Maths and Inquiry but that may not be the order for leadership and in other people’s minds.

This terse description echoed earlier findings in this research that there is a disconnect between what is being said at an official level and what is happening in practice at a local level, typified, by lack of supports in place to enhance the RE program. Time constraints (Engebretson & Grajczonek, 2012) and competition between RE and other areas of learning (Healy, 2011) were identified in other recent RE research in the Australian context. This data suggests that these factors likewise constrain leadership of professional learning.

Many observers of RE in the Australian context have argued that RE needs prominence in the curriculum (Engebretson & Grajczonek, 2012; NCEC, 2009) however, in order that there is a consistent match between these high expectations and the challenges of locally managed and agreed programs, support structures are necessary. Again the RECs' perceptions suggest an apparent dissonance between what literature/research identified as effective supports to professional learning and the opportunities and lived experiences within some schools.

Summary of this category

A common refrain in the focus groups was the lack of fit between some ambitious goals for staff professional learning and the time, structures and resources necessary to bring about significant change in RE teacher learning and practice. Responses indicated that some schools do not have adequate time, opportunities or resources to successfully implement some of the professional learning initiatives hoped for by the REC. Moreover, some RECs expressed a need for greater latitude in supporting RE staff.

An acknowledgement that the foregoing challenges are coupled with the necessity for Catholic schools to be financially viable; that the resources must be exemplary and accessible; that structures and opportunities must be timetabled are also serious considerations which must be factored into overcoming this perceived challenge. However it was evident the direction and support structures given to professional learning in religious classrooms/schools can illustrate the values and beliefs of the school community. The previous chapter provided evidence that prohibitive school structures can be overcome. First, schools need the intent to preserve the priority of RE and second, to provide the conditions to enact this commitment. This commitment ensures that all teachers, parents, students and the wider community recognize what is prized and valued by the school (Malone & Ryan, 1994).

Category Five: Demands and tensions of varying expectations of REC role

The educational dimension and the faith formation dimension of the role are complementary and inextricably linked. However one of the very consistent themes emerged, in terms of their cumulative demands on RECs. Various claims testified that it was demanding to be an effective educational leader and a ministerial leader, as well as a school administrator and leader within the school/parish community. There was evidence that some RECs experienced

heightened levels of frustration through the additional expectations placed on them, and the reduced attention given to the educational aspects of their role. Indeed some RECs articulated concern that the educational component of their role was being undermined by an overwhelming number of other tasks (administrative, managerial and ecclesial). Further, REC S reiterated the over-reliance on certain aspects of the role when he/she shared: “Nine out of ten times we do formation rather than pedagogy; we need more of an educational/pedagogical focus”. Though there were various comments about this omission neither RECs nor classroom teachers actually proposed a way of dealing with this situation. This was significant for this research as it described a gap that may exist between how formal documentation describes the operation of RE in schools and its actual practice. It also indicated that some staff do not value the educational role and have become more reliant on the ecclesial dimension. Similar concerns were expressed in earlier research with RECs in both a primary and secondary context (Buchanan; 2010, 2007; Crotty, 2005; Fleming, 2005; Healy, 2011). These major, as yet unresolved issues are continuing to emerge. That this tension continues to exist suggests that this challenge must be met by key stakeholders if an optimal role of the REC is to be realised.

A clearly defined educational role would provide a way forward however the educational aspect of the role must be recognised and respected by the PP, principals and RECs themselves. Vital questions such as what the official written role description say and how stakeholders overtly value the educational dimension of the REC role may help schools to correct the flawed approach that concentrates on the faith dimension alone. Clear status and role descriptions would add certainty, authority and agreed recognition of the educational scope of the role, and this desired change was repeated by REC participants in this research. The challenge of the fundamental divergence of opinion and practice in this area is a recurring one and flies in the face of over five years of research. Both Catholic primary schools and the CEOM can no longer ignore these findings. This issue urges educators to be pro active in advancing the educational dimension of the role of the REC if this leadership role is to be optimized.

Summary of this category

The data confirmed differences in understandings and expectations of the role which exposed a clear need for well defined parameters around the role which acknowledge and highlight its educational aspect. This view was first expressed by classroom teachers in stage one of the

research. Disparate expectations and understandings of the educational role challenged RECs to effectively carry out their role, and is perhaps symptomatic of the urgency for Catholic school communities and systems to be very clear about both educational and faith dimensions of the role.

Summary of challenges for the REC in their leadership role in RE professional learning and the implication for this research

The findings indicate some serious challenges evidenced in differences in perceptions in regard to the level of leadership support, the expectations and accountabilities of the role and the level of personal, professional and financial assistance provided to the role. Such discrepancies make a strong statement about the need for all RE stakeholders to have greater communication among themselves, if there is to be more effective and efficient use of the leadership role of the REC to enhance staff and student learning. However, despite the picture that has emerged from the data in relation to the challenges of leading professional learning in Catholic schools, these findings must be viewed against the more positive data provided in the previous chapter. This data is better viewed as an opportunity to understand the potential that good RECs have for making a difference in the light of the pressing and often competing challenges of their role. These findings focus attention on leadership *as practice* rather than as role by revealing the complex interactions and nuances of REC leadership in action. Further these categories may provide a reason for holding up a looking glass to schools and being prepared to abandon and reconsider RE leadership practices and influences detrimental to the effective implementation of the role. This can be achieved with the cooperation of those keen to explore a better understanding of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning, and to redesign and reconsider present arrangements which may be restricting or inhibiting the potential of the position.

Principals' Focus Group

Table 6.2. provides a comparison of the responses from principals in relation to factors which challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. This summary table indicates alignments and provides evidence from the data to justify these claims.

Table 6.2.

Summary of alignment between RECs and Principals focus group responses about the factors which challenge the leadership role of the REC in Professional Learning.

KEY ✓ _ indicates agreement demonstrated in statements from Principal focus groups

Summary of the Categories	Summary of the Sub-Categories	Illustrative example from Principal demonstrating alignment in understanding
Lack of leadership status and support ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removal from leadership team ✓ Reduction in focus, status, financial remuneration ✓ 	If some schools do not have an REC or the REC is a graduate or they appoint someone who is not on the leadership team, I think we are talking about Catholic schools where is the Catholic in these scenarios? It surely must be given leadership support and priority but the central and local funding may not be supportive of it and there needs to be funding made available if RECs are to succeed (P, B).
Relationship with and expectations of the PP ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding of educational role ✓ Tensions associated with being an advocate for teachers deficiencies in liturgy, knowledge etc. ✓ Divisions in models of Church 	“RE can’t be limited to how priests may want it to be done although of course they have some valid viewpoints but that should not adversely affect the overall educational focus of RE because of say lack of understanding of an integrated approach for example” (P, M).
Diversity of teacher knowledge, securities and commitment to RE ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff motivation/ attitudes ✓ Staff qualifications/ experience Staff commitment/ability to participate effectively in religious responsibilities within the school ✓ 	<p>The same as deputies and principals, management of people is important, being able to work with some staff who are not going down the same path or living the faith, go to Mass each week or not for a long time or never! Considering how do we meet their needs not dumb it down but support everyone (P, D).</p> <p>“RE may be the last thing teachers plan, if the REC misses a cycle of planning it might be missed altogether so we must challenge teachers to overcome this deficiency” (P, B).</p>
Prohibitive school structures ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time, ✓ Structures, ✓ Resources, ✓ Space ✓ 	“There is no question they can’t do their job properly without adequate time and support. How can RE have any credibility without these key elements in place?” (P, J).
Demands and tensions of varying expectations of role ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational, vs. Ecclesial. ✓ Administration, Formation 	“Especially with liturgy the REC should helped staff initially but over time we need to build teacher capacity and not rely on the REC to check every liturgy” (P, D).

The principals’ reference points were sometimes different from the views expressed by RECs. This was illustrated by one of the principals who reported the challenge of teacher knowledge in leadership terms. He/she explained this challenge in management terms, claiming the challenge was more about the confidence, skills and experience of his/her REC

to manage staff. The management skills of the REC, or lack thereof, could greatly impede the leadership role of the REC in professional learning.

Another principal suggested that by preserving their knowledge or functioning in a traditional hierarchical leadership approach, the REC could confine their expertise. This serves to perpetuate the challenge of diversity of teacher knowledge and commitment to RE by operating in a dependency model. He/she explained “we all know some RECs love to plan the Mass but we must wean them off this and help everyone to recognise that there is real professional learning in classroom teachers preparing their own Masses with the PP” (Principal, B).

Principal J also provided a different slant in relation to category two and argued:

I have had RECs who want to show due respect to the PP but they may not have formed the relationship, they do not have the working relationship that I have as a principal as we obviously work more closely together. They might feel intimidated and if they feel under pressure I am happy to step in and “run interference” when I need to.

In response to this claim another Principal (B) suggested they (a PP and REC) must “both be honest with no excuses. We must respect their (PP) decisions and their wisdom. Sometimes you must take on their advice and not get defensive or angsty and that can take time and experience”. One Principal (M) described:

Initially the PP appoints the Principal and the Principal appoints the REC and so the PP is out of that loop. We have to make sure that everything combines well so we need a close working relationship with both parties

These comments indicated that some of the challenges associated with the role can be managed or reduced with increased supports, experience and teamwork or shared leadership.

The issue of mandated guidelines about aspects of the REC role including status, funding, time allocation and supports structures were points of contention. The principals expressed divergent views about this. After some debate views were polarised, whereby a few conceded that minimum guidelines which could be applied at the local level could be useful, suggesting “Some schools take easy options, yes, I think you maybe need minimum requirements and more support with funding would help” (Principal D). Others disagreed: “Your REC might work differently from mine I would hate to see a generic role description

come out. The context makes a real difference a role description won't work for all schools and circumstances" (Principal M). Indeed another pointed out:

Maybe a suggested minimum but it has to be clear because that could cause problems They (REC) might stick solely to the description and some schools could go backwards. Of course all schools must have an REC and maybe it is better to allow for it in the award (Principal B).

This conversation led to a discussion of the recent change in REC leadership policy delivered by the CEOM with queries about why the draft had changed. Further principals wondered where people now find direction about the role of the REC. Whilst no resolution was forthcoming, a need for an uncompromising commitment to real, not just rhetorical support, for the leadership role of the REC was unanimously supported by principals in the focus group. How this could best occur was not declared.

Summary of the Principals' perspectives about Factors which Challenge the Leadership role of the REC in Professional Learning.

Whilst there was some agreement about the challenges identified, the principals did not agree in all categories. Some of the principals claimed that the REC had to learn to work with, not against, the PP and stated:

Yes it's a big thing the relationship with the PP and sometimes I need to calm them (REC) down say this is the way it is. We have been lucky in the past but sometimes the assistant priest has caused a bit of angst with class Masses and some teachers not following procedures. Now the REC has the confidence to speak to the priest and explain the situation and things can be sorted out without me having to intervene (Principal B).

This perspective indicates that RECs can grow and learn from the perceived challenges and in fact another principal agreed that his/her REC had matured in their relationship which was once daunting for the REC: "Occasionally the REC is too pushy in their way and he (PP) is the boss so you must find a way to work with him" (Principal D). These stories suggested that some perceived challenges can be growth opportunities and, with time, experience and support can be improved or even overcome.

Summary of Stage Two Findings – Part 2.

The focus groups were an integral method in this research in obtaining data to describe the world of leaders with respect to interpreting the meaning of the challenges to their leadership role in professional learning. Both RECs and principals identified the operative understandings of leadership of professional learning in RE.

The data presented in this chapter was generated from focus group discussions with RECs and principals in stage two of this research. It presented five key factors that emerged as challenges to the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. Whilst there was some agreement between principals and RECs in regard to the factors which challenge the REC in the leadership of professional learning there was clear agreement that any limitations can negatively affect the confidence and ability of the REC to effectively assist staff professional learning. Further it is hoped that these findings bring about questioning and development rather than acceptance of constraints.

Summary of this chapter

This chapter has raised a number of serious implications which require deeper reflection and impel various stakeholders to pay close attention to specific challenges within their own context/domain of influence. Assumptions cannot be made that the factors which challenge the RECs can be extrapolated to other contexts. Some challenges in this study tended to be individual and context specific. However careful consideration must be given to eliminate or minimize the challenges encountered that impact on the capacity of the REC to effectively lead professional learning.

This chapter has identified elements perceived as challenges to the REC leading professional learning that will require particular attention if Catholic primary schools are to establish and sustain positive learning environments in RE. More compelling was evidence that some of these challenges resulted in counterproductive changes to the RECs leadership role and influence. A key factor for future deliberation is the extent to which leadership of RE professional learning in a Catholic primary school might be compromised by these challenges and how these can be contained or eliminated. The theoretical proposition which follows provides a reminder that it may be necessary to invest more fully in building/developing the

leadership capacity of RECs and indeed in some cases evaluating or elevating the leadership status of the REC.

Theoretical Proposition about Stage Two Findings

In light of this display and the discussion of findings in Chapter six, the chapter concludes by offering the following theoretical propositions:

Theoretical proposition: The effectiveness of the leadership role of the REC is very much shaped and influenced by ways in which the REC is supported by others within the school and the way their leadership is constructed, developed and resourced within the school. Without these supports RECs have limited control in exercising their leadership capacities in the professional learning practices of staff and students. Consequently both the success and impact of professional learning opportunities depend on both the leadership and organizational practices which support them.

For some Catholic primary schools, there is the challenge to create a shared culture which values and supports the priority of RE and optimises the educational role of the REC in the professional learning opportunities of RE staff. A further challenge for Catholic school systems and schools is to move beyond the rhetoric and embrace the notion of building the professional capacity of RE staff through resourcing and facilitating processes which enable RECs and staff to grow in their leadership, professional practice and learning. To the extent to which the challenging categories are perceived to exist, they are not conducive to RECs being willing to take on leadership of professional learning.

Conclusion to the Chapter

Following this theoretical proposition, Chapter seven discusses the findings of the final stage of the research, stage three. Chapter seven is mainly concerned with the research question:

- How do key stakeholders perceive and value the responsibilities and leadership role of the REC in professional learning?

Using the results of numerous interviews with principals, RECs and CEO Representatives, the next chapter reveals the expectations of key stakeholders regarding the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. This data gathering strategy will triangulate with the survey and focus group strategies.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS STAGE THREE

Introduction to the Chapter

Chapter six presented and analysed findings from stage two of the research drawn from three focus groups. It also raised a number of significant implications for key stakeholders in RE. This chapter displays and analyses the findings of the study in terms of the last stage of the research. In doing so, the chapter addresses the final research question:

- How do key stakeholders perceive and value the responsibilities and leadership role of the REC in professional learning?

Chapter seven draws on unstructured interviews with RECs, principals and CEO representatives to complement the data previously generated. It provides multiple perspectives on how the REC leadership role was and should be constructed. As a GT approach was employed in this study, data was “collected and analyzed and, as the theory is being developed, additional data are collected and analyzed to further clarify and develop and validate the theory” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 381). This chapter contributes to the validity of the findings by verifying the views and understandings emerging from the different participants in this study. The chapter concludes by presenting further theoretical propositions.

The interviews centered around inviting participants to:

- Describe the responsibility of the REC in leading professional learning for religious educators
- Identify the models they found to be most effective for this

This helped to elicit the responsibility of the REC in leading professional learning for religious educators in Catholic primary schools.

Stage Three Findings – Participants

This first section of this chapter shares the data generated in stage three through unstructured interviews to explore different stakeholders' perceptions in relation to the final research question. In order to ensure that perspectives were gained across all four regions of the Melbourne Archdiocese, the participating RECs and principals were predominantly from the Southern and Eastern regions of the Melbourne Archdiocese. As input had already been gained from participants in the Northern and Western regions in stage two, the voices of REC and principals in the East and South ensured a range of contexts and experiences of leadership of RE professional learning in Catholic primary schools. Likewise input from representatives from a range of dioceses within Victoria (four) helped the researcher to appreciate the perceptions and responsibilities of the REC in leading professional learning within different systems' contexts. It also helped the researcher to appreciate the particularities of each diocese. Consequently it may be said that the findings were geographically diverse and structurally mixed. What was important to this research was a common understanding of the way professional learning and the leadership role of the REC is interpreted and used in Catholic primary settings. The latter part of this chapter compares the viewpoints of the various stakeholders against previously established core categories identified in Chapters four, five and six.

Interviews regarding the Responsibility of the REC in Leading Professional Learning for Religious Educators

The interviews tended to elicit very detailed information as the key stakeholders responded to the questions posed by the researcher. The richness of these responses indicated that the role of the REC in professional learning and student learning was highly topical. It was not surprising then that all participants had strong opinions about RECs and what RECs do! All stakeholders made substantial comments on the value and importance of the REC as a leader of learning in RE. However these were tempered by acknowledgement that these best intentions were not always actualized in Catholic primary schools, a recurring theme in this research to date. Evidence of this contention was explained by one of the CEO representatives: "Things have moved, things have changed but not for all, there are always one or two who actually, get left behind in a way by the rest" (CEO Y).

Debate about the Evolution of the REC role

There was fairly comprehensive agreement that the role had developed to some degree, over time. On the positive side, many interviewees reported more recognition and support for RECs. From a systems perspectives one respondent CEO W claimed “It’s been an interesting evolution over the past ten years, I’d say the role of the REC has now got greater prominence, it’s got a higher profile in our schools”. Another claimed reported: “They have a particular profile now that is much higher than it ever was before” (CEO L). According to participants the nature and complexity of the role was evident in the scope and diverse responsibilities now allocated to the position. This emerging understanding or increased awareness among leaders about a leadership aspect to the role developing in most instances was not universal. On the one hand, CEO L claimed that “Schools are now seeing the REC as an integral leadership position within the school” which signaled that the role had progressed. On the other hand, various contested views disclosed in this study especially in relation to a recent CEOM decision, paradoxically indicated that the role has gone backwards. REC V argued: “I actually think it is really sad the way in which it’s been heading, to be honest with you, I think over the years I have seen it downgraded”. There was a lot of argument and more than a little aggravation about this perception which was also identified in Chapter six. These sentiments are expanded upon at length later in this chapter.

Agreement about Increased Educational focus to RECs responsibilities.

A range of interviewees indicated that there had been an increased focus on the role of the REC to support professional learning and direct RE curriculum and student learning. Whilst the degree to which the REC would be responsible for professional learning varied, the predominant view was that RECs can and must play a significant part in the leadership of RE learning for both staff and students. This intent was reflected in the following comment: “There is new and greater attention given to the quality of teaching and learning in school and this general concern also affects RE” (CEO, D). CEO W confirmed “There is a high expectation that all of our RECs will drive the learning and teaching in their school in RE and connect very strongly with the Curriculum coordinator, ideally teaching and learning is now a key focus”. These sentiments indicated that RECs need to take leadership responsibility for the RE curriculum and for the overall coordination of staff professional learning in this area. It also suggested that RECs would undertake responsibilities associated with providing shared leadership across the whole school. This argument supports the contention that:

It is necessary therefore that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and same rigor as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge (Catechetical Directory, n. 74).

From a sector perspective this deliberate and specific educational focus was made explicit, CEO L shared: “We’ve talked to them [RECs] about being the drivers of professional learning, they don’t have to deliver it necessarily but they have to ensure their staff is undertaking professional learning”. Another (CEO D) highlighted the increased educational expectation: “There is an emerging understanding of this responsibility, an increasing awareness amongst leaders which has been developing over the last few years”. There was much evidence to confirm that the role of the REC was extremely important. Principal G claimed “I think we’ve got to make sure that the REC does have a high profile in the school”. Many articulated the pivotal role of the REC as a “connecting bridge” supporting the teaching needs of RE teachers and improving the learning needs of children within the RE class. Principal D illustrated a corresponding shift in the language used to describe the position; “I think changing the term from REC to REL was really good, you know that whole shift in coordinator to leadership, that’s what RE people should be doing, it is really about professional learning and building capacity”.

This broader and more expansive view of the role has resulted in a shift of thinking and duties for other related stakeholders who lead and support RECs in their role. The following lengthy reflection from CEO D has been included for two purposes: firstly it focused on the work and professionalism of empowering RECs and secondly it captured the change in the type of leadership support RECs at Catholic primary schools experienced. The reflection provided a compelling sense of a shared understanding of quality learning and teaching processes, a belief in the leadership qualities needed by the REC, and most importantly the genuine and high regard for developing and supporting local RE educational leadership practice in schools.

CEO D explained the shift in thinking:

There is a CEO team of people (RE Advisers) who support teachers in Catholic schools in various ways and in recent years there has been a gradual shift in their focus too. i.e. to place emphasis on pedagogy and less on other dimensions. In the past they would come in with ideas for prayer etc. and run staff meetings in schools. This does not empower the REC. There is a change in support now, a different

approach which aims to develop the leadership role. The former model implied (but not explicitly identified) was of the RE Advisor as mentor, expert, rescuer, doer for, and the local RE coordinator as recipient, dependent, open to being rescued. It was a sort of symbiotic relationship of co-dependence.

This extract demonstrated a clear movement from a previous support model which may result in learned dependence for RECs. CEO D explained: “RECs may think others will come to their rescue and this perpetuates the problem”. The new preferred model has progressed from one of obtaining assistance to a less reliant, more empowering approach. This shift in thinking meant that the CEO support personnel now actively expect, encourage, push for and invest in building the capacity of the REC in their educational role. Matching the literature (Andrews & Associates, 2011), it appears that some CEOs have adopted this conceptual framework founded on the notion of leadership as capacity building and have capitalized on this with their support teams as an interface between the work of RE leaders and the goal to improve RE teacher practice and student achievement.

This strategy has immense possibilities and provides an opportunity and responsibility for all stakeholders to support and work with the REC to transform and improve the work of RE staff and students. Indeed from systems perspectives, leadership support may be at a crossroads between providing support to empower the REC in their leadership role or providing reactive, limiting assistance which downgrades or diminishes the leadership potential of the REC. A shared understanding of capacity building cited by participants demonstrated a valuable way to honor and improve the leadership role of RECs. It also seemed to respect the need to improve the leadership aspect of the REC profession by investing in what may be termed building professional capital. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) this is developing collective responsibility for advancing the capabilities of staff and students.

Principals too were unanimous in their views that the REC could make a valuable and significant contribution to the quality of RE within a school through leading professional learning initiatives. Principal D suggested: “They develop confidence in the staff as well that they can plan RE and teach RE in a contemporary engaging way”. Principal D stated “I see it as one of the highest leaders of learning”. Principal H, echoing this view claimed, “It is about leadership, it is about building the capacity of staff”. However participants added an important requirement according to Principal D “They have got to be seen as leaders”. There were many examples of how this might be enacted in practice. Principal D explained how the

RECs role description was adjusted annually to reflect the priorities and strategies of delivering quality RE. This was linked directly to the SIP. Such comments indicated a clear link between individual and collective learning with a clear emphasis on instructional leadership. This strategic alignment provided a powerful example of how to transform the work of the REC to match the aims and goals of RE as articulated in key schools documentation. This individual (REC) and collective commitment (SIP) demonstrated a coherent set of action that builds a common quest to improve teaching and learning in the discipline of RE. RECs require the type of leadership that can reconcile and integrate the external accountability with personal and collective professional responsibility.

Likewise RECs agreed that they had some responsibility for professional learning within the school. REC V claimed: “It is a role responsibility definitely over my time as REC; it’s always been a responsibility as far as I know to help raise peoples’ knowledge in RE and best practice”. The extent of this assertion for other RECs remained a point of contention. Overall interviewees’ responses left little room for doubt that the REC can be legitimately viewed as having responsibility as a leader of learning. The findings in stage three indicated endorsement for the RECs role in supporting and promoting ongoing learning opportunities for staff and students. Participants realized and this research clearly demonstrated, that RECs, given the right conditions, can make a valuable and significant contribution to the quality of RE within a Catholic primary school. This accords with literature about middle leaders driving teacher quality (Toop, 2013). It was evident that some RECs drive RE teacher quality in their areas of responsibility through curriculum leadership, holding RE staff to account and developing RE staff. This reiterates the contention that the leadership influence of the REC in RE professional learning initiatives is a construct worth pursuing.

Table 7.1. provides an overview of the range of responsibilities and documentation associated with leading professional learning. The table indicates that the discussion was topical and relevant to all stakeholders. Further it illustrates agreement that RECs have a responsibility in the area of professional learning. Paradoxically the claims that the role appeared to gain hold greater prominence and status were not necessarily matched in official documentation.

Table 7.1.

Status and Documentation in regards to the role of the REC in Professional Learning

Stakeholders	Claim responsibility	Current documentation	Documentation under review/ updated	Inclusion in leadership team
CEO	4/4	0	4/4	Preferred but not prerequisite
Principals	5/5	2/5	3/5	4/5
RECs	4/5	2/5	3/5	4/5

This table confirmed the repeated assertion that, whilst many stakeholders verbally identified a commitment to the leadership status of the REC in professional learning, this assurance was not necessarily matched in written documents or in leadership practice. The urgency to provide further clarity and support to this role was evidenced at a systems level with all CEO personnel stating that their official documentation was under review or currently being updated. Many participants in this study advised that further direction and greater transparency would be needed if the leadership role was to be optimized.

Whilst a critical link between leadership of professional learning and the desired goal of improved student learning in RE has been established in the findings of stage three, again the extent of this varied greatly. On the one hand some participants could readily provide written documentation that provided current and clearly delineated professional learning responsibilities of the REC. REC C shared one such example from his/her school documentation: “to provide a variety of forms to further develop the professional development of staff”. This was matched by specific times and forums marked in the school calendar for this to occur. In contrast some written evidence of the RECs’ responsibilities was sometimes unclear, ambiguous, out of date, contested or merely token. Principal H provided a comment which surmised other situations too: “Our documentation is not necessarily in place, we do have a dated role description which can be improved on”.

Implications for the leadership practice of the REC in professional learning

The interviews provided contemporary understandings of leadership and leadership of professional learning for RECs which were pertinent to the overarching question of this research. They identified discrepancies between schools in the quality and relevance of documentation and the practice of leadership in terms of status. Such ambiguities carry innate complexities regarding the perception, credibility and support of this role. The extremes presented within the interviews highlighted that the parameters around the leadership role of the REC in professional learning need to be at least reviewed and broadened and perhaps made more explicit. In recurring instances the endorsement provided in the interviews was not matched in official documentation. Reasons for this discrepancy ranged from *it is being, or needs to be reviewed* to *we have changed it several times and we are about to change it again*. While reviews are important and part of the cyclical process of evaluation, it was difficult to understand how some RE documentation was over a decade old and for others it was nonexistent. Principal H, who was currently reviewing their school's role description and appointment processes indicated, "I get a sense it [revised and updated role description] could be exciting and identify how we can grow as a community with the right RE leadership". When schools and CEOs are working to improve and make more explicit the role specifications this can only be viewed positively. However a lesson is learnt that regular examination of schools role descriptions are necessary as they provide a relevant and current way of informing and professionalizing leadership practice in RE.

Another participant (CEO Y) explained "It is presumed that in the area of curriculum that a certain amount of professional learning would be part and parcel of the [REC] role". Evidence presented thus far in this study, has indicated that any presumption is fraught with danger and may undermine the enactment of the leadership role. Such "cursory" support may suggest ambivalence or mixed messages. When the responsibility and profile of the REC as leader of learning are not explicit certain consequences are evident. Some of these are proposed in the previous chapter as challenges. That the position in regard to leadership is currently interpreted very differently from school to school and context to context presents serious anomalies. This may lead to the impression that religious educational leadership is not so significant.

The crucial importance of a deliberate and considered appointment process combined with a current and explicit role description was universally acclaimed by all stakeholders.

CEO W declared “The strongest thing for a REC is their role specification”. Principals also indicated the importance of communicating a shared and clear role description which identifies expectations and specific responsibilities of the REC. Principal G suggested if this was in place that the REC “gets the opportunity to make sure that RE is a key focus of our school”. REC D identified “When there isn’t a role description it then becomes very loose and very fluid and that’s not necessarily a good thing”.

Testimonies confirmed that REC role descriptions which are transparently tested, developed and circulated leave no room for ambiguity or doubt about the significance of supporting RE staff in their ongoing professional learning needs. According to stakeholders, clear parameters help sharpen the operational meaning of the items contained within role descriptions. REC D explained “if there is something clear in writing that has been considered then you have somebody in the role who knows what is expected of them and they can go about delivering it”. Clear written documentation combined with ongoing monitoring and evaluation provided quality assurance to guarantee that Catholic schools do not reinforce past practice, which may restrict the role and reduce the impact of the REC to put teachers and teaching at the forefront of their leadership efforts. Further a clearly communicated role description provides accountability and shared understandings for RE staff and the school community in general. REC D reaffirmed a consistent call of participants to date when he/she suggested:

If there was something centrally recommended as a guide, not necessarily that was cast in concrete but guides and assists PPs and Principals in the appointment of a person to the role, then I think we would start to get a role that had credibility and was valued.

The continued call for clear role descriptions in RE is not new. Indeed, this research has shown that in some instances earlier recommendations and findings in research (Buchanan, 2010; 2007; Crotty, 2005; Fleming, 2005; Healy, 2011) have had little impact in affecting the actual leadership practice of Catholic school communities. In this study, persistent agreement that the REC role can be enhanced by providing clear expectations, and direction, has not always been the case in practice. Further investigation is needed to determine why, despite past recommendations from earlier research and literature (Buchanan, 2010; Dowling, 2012; Healy, 2011) for principals to provide key, negotiated and explicit requirements have not yet been put into practice. Considerations of what could/should be the role according to one CEO representative (L) “is whatever the school determines”. However

it has become obvious that only with the principals overt encouragement and support can leadership progress in professional learning be achieved. The realities evident in the findings of this data indicate that without this ingredient the role will be thwarted.

Some interviewees claimed that nothing short of a major re-visioning of the leadership role of the REC was going to yield the increased status, credibility and influence ultimately needed to improve teacher and student learning in RE. Different stakeholders agreed that only by regularly examining, clarifying, strengthening and communicating the leadership role assigned to the REC in all areas but particularly for professional learning, would RECs be enabled to provide more confident and effective leadership of learning in RE. Another obvious benefit of clear status, recognition and expectations is that RECs will be more willing and able to make the instructional decisions necessary to ensure improved levels of student learning in RE.

A growing range of findings in regard to the leadership role of the REC in writing (or lack of written documentation) and sometimes also as it is practised may be viewed as quasi professional (that is, it does not have the same rigor of professional standards) in contrast to other professions such as medicine or law. This is because, unlike the case in many other professions, RECs as leaders in the school lack common standards of professional practice specific to the Catholic RE context. Despite the existence of some relevant leadership documentation (CECV Leadership Standards, 2005) it appears that for many years now some Catholic schools and systems have gone without common, accepted and well understood standards of REC leadership both in system and school documentation. Further findings have also highlighted damaging contrasts with some other leadership positions within the Catholic primary school (i.e., Curriculum coordinators or Literacy and Numeracy coordinators) who have clear roles, status, and time allocation assigned to staff and student learning. These notable discrepancies have reiterated the findings from the literature review. Despite increased attention and research on the leadership role of the REC provided by various scholars in the Australian context (Buchanan 2012, Crotty, 2005; Dowling, 2011; Fleming, 2005; Healy, 2011; Neidhart & Carlin, 2011) it is time for all RE stakeholders to seriously question why this situation has persisted for decades. The answer may be that inconsistent leadership expectations for the REC are still prevalent across some Catholic primary schools/regions and, if not addressed this may have indelible adverse effects.

A united voice from findings with RECs and in all stages of this research demonstrated a need for clear and accepted standards of leadership of professional practice in RE. This need is also affirmed by Australian RE scholars (Engebretson & Grajczonek, 2012). Agreed standards of leadership practice may contribute to an agreed understanding by all stakeholders in the profession (both in and often outside the profession as well) about what exactly constitutes leadership of learning in RE.

Time release variables

Time release ranged from 2 days in some circumstance to one morning only a week. Principal G stated: “I give it one full day as that says this is a really critical role in the school”. Another Principal (D) shared “I give it one full day but I know others in a medium sized school would not give it that much time”. REC A shared “With a change in leadership I have increased from 2 hours to having a full day, I really think having a days release shows the importance of RE”. Again there is evidence of various expectations and supports provided to the REC to lead professional learning, but especially in relation to the time allocated to this pursuit.

Summary of the perceptions of the responsibility of the REC in leading professional learning for religious educators

The findings affirmed that that the REC position has evolved and in many instances is perceived as worthwhile especially in leading professional learning for religious educators. It is evident from these various accounts that the centrality of RE leadership has been reinforced and amplified in many instances. However there were also certain concerns and a number of issues which seem to be both long term and short term. According to some participants CEOs and principals have a lot of work to do in coming to grips with the realities of leading RE teaching, given the variation in conditions, responsibilities, status and time release afforded to this leadership role.

Perceptions of effective leadership practices in professional learning whilst valued are not as widespread as they should be if optimal RE staff learning is to occur. Nor are there clear strategies, at least in written documentation, to make them so. It was encouraging, but in keeping with previous findings perhaps not surprising to note, that most participants indicated that there should be a greater effort to further improve the status and function of the leadership role of the REC. There is now a sense of great urgency, as this study has

demonstrated more and more people care about the quality and status of RE. In the quest for improved student learning in RE a greater appreciation and commitment to the educative role of this leadership position may be needed.

If the RECs' leadership and expertise is truly to be understood and valued, findings demonstrated that this needs to be recognized, communicated and strengthened by some stakeholders. Perhaps one effort to address and enhance the professional leadership practice of the REC is to adopt more professional and accountable role descriptions/standards which give credibility to the role and spell out the expectations and status allocated to the position. There were equally ardent advocates for strengthening the efficacy of the REC profession as a whole. It is now time to seize this crucial finding. Stakeholders must decide with urgency and clarity how they can rally together to elevate RE and the leadership role of the REC to the status it deserves. If all Catholic primary schools accept the argument that RECs can be essential components and critical catalysts for the development of learning and expertise of RE staff, then the practice within schools- at least how it manifests in some schools in this research-, stands in stark contrast to the conditions necessary to successfully grow RE professional learning initiatives.

Implications for this thesis

As is the case in all professions, different stakeholders expect high personal and professional standards from the REC in their leadership role. The scope of the profound trust invested in the REC and their work was evident, however this research has confirmed that, while the expectations, status and role descriptions assigned to the REC role currently serve some Catholic primary school very well, it could be broader. Further progress and guidelines are needed to ensure that the REC understands and is explicitly supported in their RE leadership if they are in turn to support teachers and student learning in RE. The challenge is for schools to work in new and different ways to determine how RECs can best demonstrate that they have in fact acquired the leadership skills, beyond having desirable knowledge and understanding of what needs to be done to improve the quality of RE in Catholic primary schools.

Interviews: Opportunities for Leadership of Professional Learning

Interviewees provided a wealth of information to illustrate ways the REC was involved in professional learning activities which aimed to improve teacher practice and student learning in RE. It is recognized that the efforts varied in the importance of the activities attempted and accomplished within these categories, and in the degree of functionality and effectiveness. However the leadership described entailed a variety of activities that affect students' learning. Generally these could be classified similar to those presented in Chapter Five, Table, 5.2. However the interviews in the third stage did provide some relevant additional strategies which are presented in the summary table which follows, 7.2. *Summary of Opportunities for Leadership of Professional Learning*. These differences appear in grey shading.

Table 7.2.
Summary of Opportunities for Leadership of Professional Learning

Category	Teachers	REC Focus groups	REC interviews	Principal Focus groups	Principal interviews	CEO Interviews
Formal- School						
Staff meetings	√	√	√	√	√	√
Planning/PLT	√	√	√	√	√	√
Adult sacramental/Family nights	√	√	√		√	
Organizing Expert facilitators		√		√	√	
Reflection days					√	
Closure days			√		√	
Mentoring/coaching			√		√	√
Learning Walks			√		√	
Formal – Partnership						
Clusters		√		√	√	√
Conferences		√		√	√	√
Modeling		√			√	
Networking		√	√		√	√
Critical friend		√				√
Facilitating at networks						√
OS Pilgrimages						√
School visits					√	√
Informal						
Information dissemination	√	√			√	
Briefing sessions/Informal chats		√	√		√	
Resourcing				√		√

Formal professional learning opportunities were most frequent and commonly expressed opportunities for professional learning. Data revealed that RECs provided input to ensure that RE staff were aware of current approaches and pedagogies in RE. They were also often directly involved in the design and implementation of the RE curriculum, instruction and

assessment processes. An increased educational focus was highlighted in the terminology and comments offered by interviewees to describe these professional learning opportunities. For example PLTs were sometimes referred to Teaching and Learning Meetings (TLMs). There appeared to be consensus that these opportunities were usually structured and focused as verified by the following accounts: “we focus on what improves our teaching and learning in RE” (Principal P). This emphasis was noted by REC C who claimed meetings are “related to curriculum and practice... by the very nature it then impacts on the teachers”. In this way the REC is able to monitor the effectiveness of RE practices and perhaps their impact on student learning.

An emphasis on the REC as a mentor or coach was also dominant. Participants claimed that this relationship could help reduce the anxiety and sense of isolation that may keep RE teachers away from trying new approaches in their RE classrooms. These strategies also provide a non-threatening way to ensure accountability in RE. Further, whilst there was unanimity that RECs demonstrated leadership of professional learning in these various categories, there was divergence of opinion as to how much leadership was exhibited and how effective each strategy was.

Again contrary to the advocacy of online professional learning in the literature, no mention was made of opportunities to engage online as a means to share expertise, experience and ideas for the RE classroom. The data indicated that an online approach to promote opportunities for substantive learning by RE teachers is an underdeveloped concept. Whilst the importance of different models of good professional learning has become evident it appears adopting the mindset that RE educators can utilize ICT associated professional learning practices is yet to be fully endorsed or embraced by participants in this research.

Formal Partnerships

The value of learning across schools, viewing and reflecting on how to achieve best practice, was evident in a variety of interview responses. Networking and critical friends were popular with RECs as they provided recognition for and built on their experiences and aspirations, and this helped promote confidence. Similar to the findings identified in stage 2, there was recognition of the value of modeling where teachers become more comfortable sharing and helping one another to improve practice. Principal P articulated this sentiment: “Ideally the

REC is able to go into the classrooms and role model”. Principal G extended this sentiment further adding “In an ideal world I would love to see teachers going into each others’ classroom and viewing best practice in RE- following on to practices we have established for Literacy and Numeracy.” In addition to providing access to good instructional practice it allows RE teachers to collaborate and form relationships with RE colleagues within and across Catholic primary schools. Principal D promoted opportunities for RECs and teachers to share and create “pockets of excellence” in a school and across schools. He/she advocated visiting classrooms and talking with others about the observations as valid professional learning opportunities. He/she explained “I think it is really rich, not just the going and looking, but then the really unpacking of what did you see and what made a difference and what is worthwhile doing and what should we investigate”. The inclusion of “we” within this extract accentuated the collaborative nature of this learning.

There is substantial literature and extensive documentation advocating the use of modeling of best practice as was demonstrated in the literature review (Gaible & Burns, 2006). RECs as leaders must actively know how to seek and build partnerships with other learning communities with the aim of presenting models and examples of best practice to RE classroom teachers, to ensure that RE teachers are not limited by their current thinking and experiences. Such initiatives provide opportunities for RE teachers to retrain, upgrade and acquire new knowledge and skills, and provide stimulus to reflect on and improve their own practice and thus cultivate knowledge of practice. This encourages both individual initiatives and collaborative approaches to improving classroom RE practice. However this goal of best practice must be tempered with the understanding that best practice is always getting better and so is a moving target. Therefore the process of pursuing best practice in RE is just that; a process, something fluid and dynamic that RECs and RE teachers should all try to stay actively involved with.

Informal Activities

Again participants indicated that informal professional learning activities were integral to collectively sustaining and building the intellectual dimension of teachers’ work in RE and for monitoring and supporting the quality of classroom RE practice. According to the interviews informal professional learning activities helped RE teachers seek out experienced colleagues for advice or to share materials and ideas as well as discuss challenges and

solutions. These opportunities were often referred to colloquially as “lots of informal little chats” (REC, V). REC D described opportunities “ensuring we’ve got a team who are on track, understanding where RE is going and just laying on the table opportunities for people to ask questions, to seek clarification”. In this school the team was deliberately set up to include a range of experience, thereby RE teachers grow through experience and support such as sharing strategies, working together and procuring resources together. This respondent also highlighted that they met unofficially with graduates to check in on them one to one. He/she indicated that by touching base with them as simple as “How are things going in RE for you?” was always received favorably by staff. This proved a powerful means for the REC to assess the professional learning needs/interests of RE staff, thereby providing another valuable way to monitor the quality of RE in the school. Multiple sources have now confirmed that a focused discussion and analysis with colleagues and interested outsiders may stimulate reflection and improvement of RE practice.

Summary of professional learning opportunities

Despite acknowledgement of increased expectations, work intensification, combined with sometimes contradictory demands, there was a wealth of information sharing how the REC could lead/support or encourage professional learning in different ways for classroom RE teachers. What has become evident is an increasing emphasis on mentoring, coaching, and shadowing type programs and approaches to professional leadership learning (Anderson, Kleinhenz, Mulford & Gurr, 2008; Barnett & O’Mahoney, 2008; Boyd, 2008; Hargreaves, 2011). Such opportunities will constitute an important component of RE improvement only if the professional learning is focused on specific improvements in RE teacher classroom behaviors, and particularly if it is delivered in connection with a SIP. That is, initiatives are aligned with specified educational goals listed in the SIP. Again not all stories painted the role of the REC in a positive light. CEO A shared that sometimes the learning provided to RECs “doesn’t always filter down to teachers”. Some similar scenarios were identified earlier by RE teachers as a challenge (cf., Table 4.4.). This indicated that without some follow up or monitoring there may be a disconnect between the direction provided to the REC which is aimed to help RE classroom teachers, and the actual implementation of this goal back at the school. It is also important that Catholic schools create a forum for RE classroom teachers to make their professional learning requests heard.

The interviews provided a forum to verify different participants' perceptions in regard to the factors which support leadership of professional learning. An overview of these findings is presented in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3.

Table comparing Core Categories with responses from different stakeholders in regards to factors which support leadership of Professional Learning in RE.

Core categories	RE staff	REC Focus groups	REC Interviews	Principal Focus group	Principal Interviews	CEO Interviews
Shared advocacy and commitment to RE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shared leadership		✓	✓	✓		✓
Staff understanding and engagement in RE	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
RECs ongoing personal and professional learning		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Structural/System supports	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Capacity Building				✓	✓	✓

Shared Advocacy and Commitment to RE.

A noteworthy finding is that all sectors agreed that RE needed to be a priority in a Catholic primary school. This priority would be evidenced in an assurance by all in leadership roles to support and commit to all endeavors for quality RE. Principal D highlighted this theory in practice:

We meet as a leadership team and then we all support and assist each other with the RE PLT coming up. There might be something that she [REC] wants us all to do and others are able to offer support and share this load.

Repeated claims that principals and leadership teams must converge their professional relationships, their work and their learning on teaching and learning, if schools were to achieve increased quality in RE, was evident in the interviews. Principal M also claimed:

We talk about what the term goals may be...we talk with her about what they might look like, why is it that we think these things are needed..... so they are discussed in a leadership team but she's got the support of six different minds.

This indicated that that the more *all* leaders focus on the core business of teaching and learning in RE, the greater their likely influence on student learning becomes. CEO L extended this further and explained "I think understanding what their role is in terms of their school leadership and understanding the voice they have through their role and being able to articulate that is crucial". This implied a responsibility not just of the REC but of all in school leadership positions to support and encourage the *active* leadership of RE and demonstrate their united commitment to the pursuit of quality RE.

Shared leadership

Shared leadership is considered essential to thinking about leadership in education settings (Beatty, 2008) and continued to be a prevalent theme in this research. Duignan et al., (2003-SOLR Project) advocated the need stemming from an important shift in the meaning, perspective and scope of leadership in schools to build environments that promote, nurture and support leadership and leaders. This was evident in practice when REC C expressed: "You have cooperation, there is an understanding of the sequence of events, where things have come from, clear goals, where we are heading, what we want and then we know there's an opportunity for reflection". Shared leadership as both a concept and practice grows out of the shared vision, beliefs and efforts of those committed to quality RE. When RECs and principals spoke about shared leadership, they noted the value in recognizing inclusivity, collaborative decision making and empowerment of others. This concept appeared to be a valid mechanism to reduce the significant load of RECs as positional leaders and to build the capacity of others within the schools' RE team.

The ability to share and distribute leadership responsibilities was presented in an example of a supportive PP who trusted in the educational decisions of the school team. The following extract illustrated the view of the value of investing in RE teachers' capabilities: "he (PP) is supportive in the role he will let us (teachers) do what we think is best for the kids, and he will say he is not an educator, he is not a teacher so he doesn't know what's suitable for kids so he's happy for us to do that side of it" (REC A). At other times the PP would share and take a more lead role, recognizing that progress can be achieved when teams cooperate to counter each other's weaknesses and maximize each stakeholder's strengths.

From this perspective the REC indicated that shared leadership was a product of the ongoing processes, interaction and negotiation amongst all stakeholders in RE. Shared leadership implies multiple conversations at all levels to engage all RE stakeholders in decisions about improving teaching and learning in RE. These perspectives mirrored, action one of the pillars of the NCSL (2006) which advocated the investment in leadership capability- to build the value, beliefs and attributes of effective leadership in all members of staff (NCSL Booklet 3.1, Distributed Leadership, p. 22).

Staff understanding and engagement in RE

Most participants were in agreement that RE staff come with all levels of attitudes and levels of understanding and experiences in RE. This being the case, CEO Y reiterated the benefit of “the value given to the [REC] role by the teachers”. The relational side of the RECs role leadership was immediately apparent in many other interview comments. This was interesting as RE teachers cited in Chapter four were also responsive to facilitators who demonstrated proficiency and understood their needs as learners. Thus the relational aspect of professional learning has gained endorsement from all participants in this research. Social relationships can deepen or hinder professional learning in RE. Those interviewed highlighted the need to recognize staff needs and value relationship building with RE staff. Principal D reiterated: “I guess she [REC] is able to know the staff pretty well so she is able to pitch at the different levels of learning that she needs to”. Principal H claimed this was a litmus test for an REC: “It depends on who your REC is and how that leader brings RE staff along with them”. This indicated the REC needs the ability to know teachers’ strengths and needs and to develop a realistic plan for both intellectual and social capacity building. REC C provided his/her experience: “It’s about getting the communication right, being tuned in to where staff are at”. A pleasing sign that some REC’s are proactive in this area came from REC V: “I do surveys trying to find out what they [RE staff] want to know more about.”

RECs ongoing personal and professional learning

There has been a consistency in a range of findings which affirmed that RECs themselves must continue to learn if they are to function effectively in their leadership role. Specific emphasis was placed on the creation of partnerships and opportunities to enhance their own learning so as to facilitate the learning of RE staff. CEO L claimed “ it’s about enriching the leader so that they in turn can move and maybe do some formation with the teacher because,

in actual fact, it is going to be the teachers who impact on what happens in the classrooms” Principals’ consistently reiterated the need for RECs to extend their own learning. Principal D described the need for ongoing personal and professional learning and claimed “they have to be seen as learners-leaders of learning, constantly challenging themselves and reflecting”. All CEO representatives expressed a keen interest to help the REC in schools to establish and sustain positive learning environments. They shared concerted efforts by their organizations to enhance the RECs ongoing personal and professional development and strategically developed moves to enhance the exercise of leadership at all levels of the school. This commitment was demonstrated by Induction programs, network meetings and leadership development initiatives like the Country Diocese Leadership program. Further it was reported that CEOs expend significant resources in money, professional expertise and administration in support of the work of leading RE in Catholic primary schools.

Structural/System supports

Numerous participants have affirmed the benefits both of structural and system supports. The interviews provided an extended forum to elaborate on these rewards. Principal P spoke at length about the previous funding the CEO put into supporting the RECs and giving sponsorship. He/she explained these actions “did give that lift in profile... I think it was really making people consider it as a career path, a leadership path”. Likewise CEO W shared how with a focused investment in RECs they have noted “There has been a trend across our diocese where a number of people have used their leadership in RE and have gone on to become principals, deputies like a stepping stone”. These insights revealed that appropriate structural/system supports encouraged the leadership of RECs and gave additional status to the role. It also validated the position as a legitimate leadership role.

Earlier findings (Table 4.3.) reflected the endorsement RE classroom teachers gave to the need and value of structural and system supports, demonstrating that from the RE teachers’ perspective to enable the REC to effectively function in their leadership role consideration must be given to supports such as structures, funding and time. These intentions resonated with all participants in this study, as evidenced in Table 7.2. Typical comments in support of this contention included the following: “Time is often the thing that they talk about they don’t have enough time to do the things that, well everything they need to do” (CEO, Y), and “the role needs to be balanced with time allocations” (REC, C). There

is now irrefutable evidence that the REC cannot successfully lead professional learning without structures and supports in place which enable the leadership of learning.

Resources

Again it was principals who emphasised that to effectively lead professional learning in RE demands good use and access to RE resources especially in relation to ICT. Interestingly this need was also a concern for RE classroom teachers as shown in Chapter four. One Principal (P) shared his/her RECs interest and expertise in leadership of professional learning by a concerted effort to understand and access: “What is out there, like the best resources”. A different Principal (D) described “she [REC] is very technology minded and she uses the world of blogs and so on for further reflection and investigation in RE, she is always online and quoting articles and tapping into others people’s good practice globally”.

The benefits of extending learning through access to online expert speakers, presenters, resources and likeminded practitioners highlights the value and potential of eLearning to assist RECs in considering and addressing questions and themes within the RE classroom. The more RECs know and the more skilled they are in using and sharing effective contemporary RE classroom resources, the better equipped they will be in supporting RE teachers to improve their practice and the more successful Catholic schools will be in advancing learning in RE. Limited evidence from different participants in this study indicated the online environment can be designed as a springboard to support RE teachers’ professional learning as they engage with the RE curriculum. This engagement will not only provide opportunities for RE teachers to reflect on current pedagogy, but perhaps also guide future teaching practice/resources so as to meet the needs of the contemporary RE classroom.

Capacity Building

Just like the principals in the focus groups, various stakeholders commented that the leadership role of the REC would be best enacted with a real vision and understanding of building capacity. As occurred with the focus group principals, their comments were often forwarded in management speak such as *Human resource development* or *organizational development* terms which were introduced in the Literature review (Bassey, 2003; Furlong, 2007). These comments alluded to a sophisticated understanding of leadership. Capacity building was presented as an objective to increase the ability of individuals, groups

organizations/institutions to deliver quality education for all students in RE. Advocacy and arguments for leadership, capacity building and school improvement as revealed in the literature analyzed in Chapter three (Dimmock, 2012) are key issues confronting today's policy makers, practitioners and academics in the field of educational leadership. In the interviews across different sectors, stakeholders shared experiences of working in effective partnerships to continually enhance educational outcomes for students in RE. This constitutes a strong argument for prioritizing capacity building in RE with a significant and sustained commitment of both financial and human resources.

Summary of Supports

Stage three confirmed from a range of perspectives, that certain supports are essential in increasing the knowledge, skills and dispositions of RECs in order to enable a high level of leadership learning for staff and RE students. There are seeds of hope in the current leadership of professional learning practice in RE. These seeds need to be explicitly named and nurtured. Multiple sources have now confirmed that RE leadership must be shared and should be the professional work of everyone within the Catholic primary school (Neidhart & Lamb, 2011). This commitment requires equal attention to the supports and resources which will enable this to be achieved. The reiteration of categories identified as supports to the leadership of professional learning invites new questions and new possibilities for some Catholic school contexts. These can be drawn upon to advance thinking and practice in the highly specialised area of leadership of classroom RE. CEO L drew the simple but obvious conclusion about the supports needed for RECs to effectively lead professional learning in Catholic primary schools: "If RECs do not get the support they need then the [RE] teachers do not get the support". This observation goes to the crux of this research's overarching investigation.

The dynamic interplay between the supports and challenges of leading professional learning in RE

Thus far the issue of supports and challenges of REC leadership have been examined in isolation. Before a closer examination occurs, of the factors which challenge leadership of professional learning in RE as perceived by the interviewees, the focus turns next to the interplay between these two dynamics. The dynamic interplay between the supports and

challenges of leadership in professional learning was captured by a participant who stated: “The support factors and the impediments, I think they’re one and the same..... the things that can be of great support to the REC can also be in other situations an impediment” (CEO, L). This causal relationship was epitomized by CEO D who contended: “Principals can encourage or disable RECs in their role” and extends the link between the challenges and supports expressed previously in Chapter six. By being attuned to how these categories compete and complement one another Catholic schools may be better able to assist RECs with the conflicting agendas and directions that they sometimes endure.

In the next section the challenges according to different stakeholders’ viewpoints are summarised. These challenges are problematic for RECs who are intent on improving teacher practice in RE. Again there is often a troubling disconnect between hearing stakeholders wishing they could improve RE quality through various supports and processes, at the same time sometimes neglecting to fully understand that RECs instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in this undertaking. It will also, not be sufficient to have only rhetoric of the support of REC leadership in professional learning, RECs will truly need to believe that they have a real say in pedagogy and curriculum in RE. This findings reiterated the arguments which appeared earlier in the literature review and provide a timely cue: "By their actions, or inaction, students, teachers, middle managers, and head teachers help determine the fate of what happens in schools" (Mulford & Silins, 2003, p. 175).

Challenges

As illustrated in Chapter six, findings from focus groups recognized that some core categories which challenge the leadership of professional learning consequently hinder the REC’s efforts to support the learning of RE staff and students. Evidence of low status and being rewarded poorly in terms of pay, support and status were issues that concerned participants in this study and surfaced in most data gathering methods. Overcoming these perceived barriers was a constant source of tension, frustration and challenge to participants in stage three. Numerous stakeholders have lamented the fact that these challenges weaken the professionalism of RECs as leaders and the practice of RE leadership. Table 7.4. examines the previously established categories with findings from all stakeholders participating in this research. It identifies areas of convergence and also establishes some new core categories identified at the bottom of this table by grey shading. The resonance between stories shared

leads to a common understanding and renewed efforts to support and encourage the active leadership of the REC in any professional learning efforts in RE.

Table 7.4.

Table comparing Core Categories with responses from different stakeholders in regards to factors which challenge leadership of Professional Learning in RE.

Core categories	RE staff	REC Focus groups	REC Interviews	Principal Focus group	Principal Interviews	CEO Interviews
Lack of leadership status and support		√	√	√	√	√
Relationship with and expectations of the PP		√	√	√	√	√
Diversity of teacher knowledge, affiliation and commitment to RE		√	√	√	√	√
Prohibitive school structures	√	√	√	√	√	
Demands and tensions of varying expectations of role.		√		√	√	√
Lack of RECs own leadership/ experience			√		√	√
Parents			√			√

Lack of leadership status and support

This category has been prevalent in all stages of the findings. CEO representatives conceded that in most cases the school leadership team includes the REC but that is not always the case. Further CEO Y claimed “Sometimes they are included in the leadership team but it is kind of a token thing”. All agreed that this status was entirely dependent on each school and has been the cause of grief and angst most notably for RECs. The extent and ramification of this category are far reaching. When discussing the impact of losing CEO funding for the role and the schools’ resultant downgrading of the role from Deputy to a lower POL, REC V stated “So, after 18 years of doing REC, I won’t be doing it next year”. This decision was not taken lightly and the REC claimed he/she agonized over this verdict but was determined to take a stand on principle. Given that in the stage two focus groups RECs were particularly

animated about this situation, there is now troubling evidence that hardworking and committed RECs will walk away from the position if they feel it is downgraded or undervalued. Research from Fleming (2002) has already noted a high turn-over rate in RECs in the Melbourne Archdiocese. This experience of REC V may be for other RECs a logical conclusion to many of the heated arguments forwarded by disheartened RECs in the previous chapter. This was a key issue of contestation and signals a clear warning that if this challenge is not met soon the appeal of RE leadership as a career may be damaged. Frustration in this area may also result in a difficulty to both attract and sustain quality leaders in RE. Further, like REC V if others through frustration and lack of support also chose to resign from the REC position, years of experience and good will may be compromised and lost.

A different example of a challenge from lack of leadership support was evidenced in the claim of leadership not honoring the conditions established for professional learning in RE. REC V shared:

I fought for staff meetings even though I don't really like presenting in front of people but I had to fight for that and really fight and in the end I have had them canceled on me because something else was deemed more important.

This experience reinforced that good leadership intentions must be matched by equally committed actions. Direction and supportive leadership are essential and cannot be left to occur haphazardly.

Relationship and expectations of the PP

Unrealistic expectations from the PP and the repercussions of this was evident in different guises throughout different stages of the data collection. One Principal (P) spoke of a common challenge thrust upon Catholic schools when he/she described "We get the pressure from PP and their Congregations as to, you know, why aren't your kids at Church? The RE role is harder for us in this situation". Whilst the literature demonstrated the context of RE has changed (cf., Chapter one) it seems this recognition is not understood by some PPs. Matching earlier findings some work remains to be done to more closely align the goals of RE for various stakeholders and to recognize the realities of the contemporary Catholic context.

Diversity of teacher knowledge, affiliation and commitment to RE

Data has clearly expressed the ambivalent feelings that a good number of stakeholders continue to have regarding the value and priority of RE. A contrast of teachers' attitudes and the intent of RECs was illuminated by REC A: "planning... it's probably not the highest priority for most people, whereas in my classroom that's what I plan first and I work in everything else around that". This contention was often repeated. Confirming earlier findings, urgent and due consideration must be given to ways to overcome this reluctance and negativity and to strengthen the attitudes and commitment of teachers to quality learning in RE. When teacher motivation is down efficacy is affected and teacher efficacy is an important factor in effective schools (Sergiovanni, 2003).

The CEOM stated that "our society is both blessed and challenged by a growing diversity of cultures and faiths" (2009, p. 2). In a recent *Pastoral letter on the Catholic Church in Education* Archbishop Hart suggested: "Growing marginalization of faith is an issue for the Church and for all its agencies" (2012, p. 2), a sentiment signaled earlier by Bishop Robinson (1996), who noted that "There has been a weakening of Catholic identity and culture in Australian society" (p. 1). Changing attitudes within society and culture appear to give rise to an increased number of staff who do not see RE as a priority. The difficult issues emerging from this data affirmed the increasingly prominent Australian Catholic educational discourse in this area, especially in relation to Catholic identity (Pollefeyt, 2012; Catholic Bishops of NSW & ACT, 2007). Further recent literature confirmed that Catholic identity has become a crucial issue; "Maintaining a Catholic identity in Catholic educational institutions emerges as a challenge for Catholic education in the 21st century cultural context, that is increasingly ambivalent, if not hostile, to religion" (Mc Kinney & Sullivan, 2013, p. 29).

To the extent to which these challenges are perceived to exist, it is not conducive to quality learning in RE. Individual RE teachers and their concerns, fears and insecurities must be discussed openly. Ultimately, special attention will need to be focused on RE teachers as leaders of learning improvement. The more RE teachers know and the more skilled they are in teaching RE, the more successful Catholic schools will be in advancing learning in RE (O'Brien, 2007). The challenge is to find ways of encouraging more teachers to value RE and feel more confident as RE teachers, as well as to provide them with the support and resources necessary to change current attitudes and practices. Given the realities of this category it

appears that RECs as leaders of learning must be resilient, persistent and adaptable in their efforts to understand and develop RE staff.

Prohibitive school structures

The solution to the problem highlighted in the former category is intertwined with this core category. There were many examples of conditions and situations which negated the value of investing in developing RE teachers' capabilities. Time was again prominent. CEO L: "If you really believe the REC is a leader in the school who will be used to lead conversations to lead professional development in this area then we have got to ensure that time is allocated". There are now various concerns that expectations to increase the quality of RE through professional learning have been introduced without making a commitment to providing adequate time, support and resources for RECs and RE teachers. The discussion surrounding this category demonstrated that some schools can no longer rely on support practices that were developed for past conditions and circumstances. The imperative of greater school support structures requires that the ways of thinking and responding to RE professional learning may have to change considerably, if not substantially in some schools. A renewed emphasis on learning together and creating processes and conditions that encourage everyone in the school community to focus on continuous learning, is more likely to bring about whole school improvement in RE. It is time to initiate ongoing conversations about guidelines, financial assistance and additional resources required to support and sustain quality professional learning in RE. Towards this end it became obvious that in country dioceses some support structures were impeded by travel, or as one CEO representative coined the phrase "Tyranny of distance is a problem". Interviewees explained how the time and cost of going to professional learning can place unwanted stress on the participants and their motivation to participate in professional learning options.

Demands and tensions of varying expectations of role

Many interviewees noted the flow on effect from a perceived or actual "imbalance" of duties for the REC. Framing their concerns about the overall lack of focus on the teaching of RE participants reiterated the claim that the REC should be viewed as "A leader of learning, not just a leader of RE and all things faith and holy and Mr or Mrs Mass person" (CEO Y). What makes these interpretations of RECs as leaders predominantly in ecclesial duties problematic is the absence of consideration and concern for the quality and implementation of the RE

program within a school. Lack of clarity about what is important may result in undermining efforts to improve teaching and learning in RE through the medium of professional learning. This view was recognized in the earlier work of Fleming (2005) and Crotty, (2005) and now this research shows it has yet to be eliminated.

Again there were claims that the extent of the educational role of the REC was often ambiguous, problematic and contested. The low level of clarity which surrounds this issue appears to frustrate RECs who wish to center the educational role. Whilst the concept of a clear, shared understanding of the different but equally important dimensions of the REC role is not new, the practical side of developing communities that honor this notion remains challenging, even elusive. While success is sporadically witnessed, the rhetoric and promise of the debate have outdistanced attempts to realize the ideal in schools. The need for a far more educative function of the role remains. Some schools now need to confront and change limited mindsets that prevent the educational role of the REC and negate efforts that serve to promote quality teaching in RE.

New core category –Lack of RECs own leadership/experience.

The RECs own perception of themselves and their capability, their competence and their confidence to lead professional learning was an additional category established by the interview responses in stage 3. A typical comment to explain this challenge was forwarded by CEO W:

A challenge for the REC themselves is for them to be more proactive and assertive in their role and knowing how to speak about it. Knowing how to speak about leadership and knowing what leadership really is and being able to identify how they can bring a real richness to the conversation that may happen in leadership teams.

CEO Y's view corresponded with these sentiments: "Experience and knowledge is really important, some of our RECs just don't have it or don't have a lot of study behind them". Without self-belief and leadership knowledge and experience it is understandable that leadership of professional learning becomes difficult. From REC Y's perspective when the principal and deputy are away from the school and they become the leader of the school, they admitted a lack of confidence in their own leadership ability:

These sorts of things I find a little daunting because one day when I was the leader and I was like please God don't let anything happen, because you know you are

not....as a classroom teacher, you're not trained for all of these things. So there were things I had to do that I didn't think I would have to do as REC but have come under the leadership role of the REC.

This lack of confidence may be exacerbated by a perceived lack of transition support for RECs. Participants identified a lack of leadership training for the transition from coordinator to leader. Typical of those who identified this concern was Principal P who revealed "If a leader is leading education and you know the future, the big question is, who trained them from being coordinators to being leaders and who trained them, even from being teachers to being coordinators in that role". Any omission of leadership development, or transition, can perpetuate the extent and prevalence of this issue, as RECs may have inherited leadership duties which are beyond their present capabilities or experiences. Despite the fact that the current leadership induction programs for beginning RECs are helpful, some interviewees raised concerns about experienced REC participants who have had to cope with the position changing to a more leadership role in recent years. Explaining this difficulty Principal P highlighted "RECs were in the role and then it became leaders, they do not get the opportunity to do the introduction to the role because they're experienced in the role but actually they haven't learnt how to lead". These sentiments are indicative of all new leadership roles, and provide a timely reminder that any leader needs to do more than understand theories of leadership or what makes effective teaching, they also need the confidence and skills to take effective *leadership action* to achieve improved student outcomes and teacher effectiveness.

Another challenge emerged in regards to others' perception of the REC. CEO W suggested that some RE teachers: "don't perceive them [REC] as someone who can perhaps lead them in professional learning if you like or have the ability to do that". Some explanation for this perception was shared by another participant (REC D) who explained: "For somebody who has been, for a whole lot of different reasons, thrown into the role rather than being placed strategically because the school believes they're the best person for it, it can become very difficult for them". This experience suggested that some Catholic primary schools are not paying enough attention to leadership succession and the importance of identifying potential leaders early and having mechanisms and supports in place to develop their talents over time. With evidence from a range of sources of the solid commitment to quality RE (cf., Chapter two), it is astounding to contemplate that such a situation described above, may still occur in Catholic primary schools. However similar comments both from

CEO interviews and principals indicated that this scenario was indeed still happening. This finding indicated that schools need to provide multiple opportunities for potential leaders to gain experience in leadership and match this with invitations and support to undertake professional learning to develop the necessary skills to be successful leaders of RE in their community.

A similar leadership concern was identified by RE classroom teachers (cf., Table 4.6.) namely that some RECs may attend professional learning opportunities where it is intended that they share this back at school with RE teachers, when this may not occur. This view was explained by CEO Y: “The REC gets professional learning and that is fine but it doesn’t always filter down and that problem is the RECs, some are very good at passing on the information and some are not”. These findings reiterated that some Catholic schools still have some way to go to ensure that their RECs as leaders of learning in RE are supported, nurtured and assisted to fully develop their leadership potential and the competencies they need to fulfill their leadership role in the Catholic primary school.

New core category –Parents

The interviews indicated that, just as RE teachers attitudes and behaviors can be detrimental to the leadership of professional learning, so too can those of some parents in a school community. Various principals discussed at length the reality of the parents in their school using the term “unchurched” and describing the frustrations of lack of knowledge and commitment parents may have which, in turn, is transferred to their children. Principal G recalled: “probably one of our challenges and I would say it is not just an issue at our school, is what I would call, to make up a word, the “churchliness” of younger staff members and school parents”. He/she continued to explain how this problem presents: “I guess engaging parents in the RE program, getting them to family Masses it’s very difficult, very difficult”. He/she spoke at length in relation to this challenge concluding that:

They [parents] want their kids to go to a Catholic school, they want them to receive the sacraments, they want them to go to school masses but they want it all.... the school must do it. They back off from really having an active role.

Compounding the previously identified challenges, the attitudes and behaviors of parents also have an impact on the effectiveness of the role of the REC in supporting teaching and

learning in the community and this indicates some widespread lack of support for the RE program.

Summary of challenges

It is important to recognize, honor and (re)conceptualize the strains that RECs may experience within their various working environments. There seems to be strong agreement across different stakeholders that there are some significant issues that need to be addressed. This consensus recognized that the constraints on the REC role are not to be underestimated. According to interviewees, some leadership decisions and enactment of professional learning opportunities have been constrained by CEO decision making and the perceived lack of leadership status and support provided to the REC at a local level. Unless there is a clear, shared vision of the priority of RE and a coherent program to enact and sustain this vision, then this situation will continue. Catholic primary schools must be assisted to identify, adopt and articulate a particular educational stance for the REC which also takes account of the culture and conditions in which schools and their students are situated. Perhaps policies and practices to address the challenge of promoting the leadership role of the REC in a Catholic school need to be strengthened to change some former conceptions about the role of the REC which appeared to be deeply ingrained. The present time offers the opportunity to strengthen the professional standing of RECs. The challenges indicated that it is time for teachers in the RE profession to be led by, for and with leaders and stakeholders who join in concerted action to support and improve student learning in RE.

The level of expectations and the quality of the relationship with PP, RE staff and parents can also impede the leadership of professional learning in RE. Stakeholders now must recognize divergent positions in sensible ways if the mutual goal to improve teacher and student learning in RE is to be achieved. Further unless Catholic schools strategically identify, develop and support both potential leaders as RECs and existing RECs, some of these long standing issues will continue to challenge the leadership of professional learning. Stakeholders can no longer stand aside or wait for improvements to occur, nor can they any longer ignore these findings. Awareness of the factors which might enable or constrain the efforts of the REC to develop staff and student learning are crucial in the pursuit of quality RE. This data may enable other schools to reflect on their own present and future situations using information provided by the schools themselves in conversations with key stakeholders in their community. Catholic schools and CEOs must confront these core challenges and

present and develop clear alternatives if the role of the REC is to be optimized. Recommendations to specifically address these challenges are provided in the following and final chapter of this thesis.

Key issues, reflections and directions

The interviews provided an appropriate forum to affirm, discount or add to the previously identified categories in this research. This next section of this chapter considers a number of overarching themes which require further reflection, clarification and action. They are noteworthy because they are supported by all of the stakeholders, or they are a source of debate because of differing views between the stakeholders. Whether they are issues of consensus or controversy, they all require that the different stakeholders look for ways to address them in a collaborative manner. The nature of the issues and interests for each stakeholder varied however, it was possible to identify complementary areas of concern and potential cooperation. In the findings thus far, it has become evident that different perspectives and expectations can both enrich and jeopardize cooperative efforts. It is important to acknowledge both the similarities and differences in perspectives and priorities of RE stakeholders. The following and final chapter of this thesis indicates areas where cooperation and partnerships will help to remove some of the barriers and help to promote the leadership of staff and student learning in RE.

The following themes and issues point to areas where more dialogue and cooperation among RE stakeholders is necessary.

- Appointment processes and role description;
- Communication of shared expectations and responsibilities assigned to the role;
- Level of status - inclusion in leadership team, POL status and conditions including release and remuneration;
- Level of leadership opportunities and support afforded to the REC role;
- Transition processes for experienced RECs without leadership experiences, qualification etc., who now have inherited a new leadership title and responsibilities for which they may be unprepared or unwilling to accept;
- Level of leadership opportunities and support afforded to RE in general;
- Shared understanding of ways to collaboratively improve and reconceptualise the leadership role;
- Commitment that RE be presented and pursued in a way that gives it equal importance alongside other discipline areas. It needs to be supported in a manner that allows other stakeholders to recognize and respect this commitment.

Whilst it was clear that one of the reasons why there is considerable interest in leadership of professional learning in Catholic schools, is to support RE teachers' learning, the reality of how much emphasis and support is actually given at the system, school or personal level is not as clear. Hence, the concern is raised that, if leadership of professional learning is acknowledged by each sector as an important and an effective element in student learning in RE, then there needs to be further consideration given to what is being done, what needs to be done and how stakeholders can collaboratively promote and support work in this area. The challenge is to keep the conversation going and to preserve and strengthen the goal of improved student learning in RE.

Summary of Stage Three Findings

This chapter has presented some of the theories generated in stage three interviews about the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. This information helped to situate contemporary leadership of professional learning in RE within the mores and the practices of schools throughout the dioceses of Victoria. Stage three data reinforced the importance of the educational leadership role of the REC. It affirmed the leadership role of the REC in the pursuit of improved RE teacher learning but, at the same time, warned against simplistic formulation of how this might be lived out. It reiterated the need for explicitness of this leadership, supported by official documentation. It recognized a need for clarity and detail in the way the RECs' leadership role is understood and implemented. It has become evident that it is not sufficient to have broad aspiration, this needs to be evident in policy and documentation as well as school leadership practices and supports. Not only must these be made explicit but they must become the objects of consistent deliberation.

There are significant implications from this study that greater attention should be given to optimizing the role of the REC as leader in professional learning in RE. The findings proposed in this chapter advocated an important shift in the meaning, emphasis and scope of the RECs leadership in some Catholic schools. Whilst the tasks, expectations and skills of RE leaders is constantly changing, and the concept itself is continually shifting and evolving, clearly what emerged from the data is a need to develop more nuanced understandings of the nature of the educational leadership needed to influence RE teachers' attitudes and practices. Special attention will need to be focussed on the RECs as leaders of learning.

A sign of the religious heritage that the Catholic school proclaims is the attention it devotes to RE and staff development in RE. Data from RE teachers, RECs, principals and now also CEO representatives reiterated the major challenge to those responsible for leading professional learning in RE. That is, a prevailing tendency within some schools for other learning areas to take precedence over one of the integral objectives of Catholic education (elucidated in Chapters one and two) –RE.

Final remarks about Stage Three Findings

Chapter seven has focused on the perspective of RECs, principals and CEO representatives from throughout Victoria to provide a comprehensive account of the perceptions and practices of RECs in leadership of professional learning. The data largely reconfirmed existing findings about the role and demonstrated that some knowledge and understanding applied across a range of systems and different contexts. In general and with few notable exceptions, there has been evidence of growth in the potential of the REC role. At best it is regarded as a pivotal position in the school, while in the extreme the role is vague, without a clear point of reference and open to interpretation. The exceptions suggested that system and school leadership support can both sustain and drive or in other cases hinder and obstruct the educational leadership development of the REC and by default the goal of delivering improved educational outcomes in RE. In general interviewees felt there was room for improvement in the development and support provided to the REC as a leader in professional learning. It is necessary to stress that the examples of leadership of professional learning provided in this chapter should be taken as sources of insight and ideas, not as proven best practice which can be universally applied.

Theoretical Proposition about Stage Three Findings

In light of the extensive display and the discussion of findings in Chapter seven, the chapter concludes by offering the following theoretical propositions:

Theoretical proposition: Numerous stakeholders in RE regard the improvement of the leadership capacity of the REC as a high priority and an area where more has to be done. In order to achieve this Catholic schools need to provide opportunities for leadership growth within their schools. Leadership development is critical to ensure effective succession in leadership and to carefully manage the level of leadership that RECs may take on as their leadership role grows in expectations and responsibilities.

The development of an explicitly shared leadership role implies a commonality of purpose and clarity of conceptualisation. Without an explicit and recognised leadership role, it appears unlikely that some RECs would have the confidence, skills or the reason to engage in taking on the mantle of educational leadership in RE which promotes staff and student learning in RE. Catholic primary schools must be assisted to identify, adopt and articulate a particular leadership stance for the REC which takes account of their educational role and provides a framework and structure within which leadership growth can be better explored and monitored.

RECs need time, resources and opportunities to develop as leaders. With the right supports, status and motivation RECs can be given an increasingly central role in the educative leadership within the school. RE stakeholders look forward to a time when CEOs, principals, RECs, classroom teachers and parents are united in their efforts to value RE and ongoing teacher learning to such an extent that they set aside time for it in school timetables and teaching loads and they build in systems and structures to support classroom teachers' professional learning as a fundamental element in RE teachers' work.

Conclusion to the Chapter

In Chapter seven data gathered from interviews administered to a range of key stakeholders of professional learning in RE was used to construct a presentation of the findings of stage three of this research. These perspectives on leadership and professional learning help to address the last research question. Key findings, together with implications and theory outlined in previous chapters, provide a basis for answering the overarching research question of this thesis. They also assist in framing some concluding remarks and for considering a number of implications and recommendations for the RE profession in Chapter eight.

Chapter eight aims to provide another dimension to the analysis in order to develop a theory about the leadership of professional learning in RE which moves beyond thick description (Goulding, 2002). This will be achieved by referring to the insights gained from a variety of experts who have commented on the theory generated. According to Glaser (1978) the grounded theory researcher can be aided in developing a theory that goes beyond thick description by considering knowledge and theory gained from outside sources such as the insights from the experts consulted over the duration of this research and presented in different RE publications, Conferences and Symposiums.

CHAPTER EIGHT: REVIEW, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction to the Chapter

This final chapter brings together the findings of the research conducted for this thesis, and it has four sections. The first section provides a synopsis of the context, purpose and design of the study. The second section responds to each of the research questions in turn, showing the conclusions, consolidated theory and recommendations related to each. The third section and the final section addresses the limitations and significance of the study as well as suggestions for further research.

Context, Purpose and Design of the Study.

Chapter one of this thesis showed that the RE classroom is a critical expression of a school's Catholic identity. However whilst the nature of RE is wide ranging and remains an area of contention in the literature, there is evidence that in recent years, RE leaders, teachers and curriculum developers (Dowling, 2011; Nolen, 2008) have increasingly worked towards the consolidation of RE as a curriculum area comparable with other subjects. In this study, the educational role of RE was highlighted and the contention that "the focus of every school, every education department or faculty of education [should be] student learning and achievement" (Dinham, 2008, p. 1) was foundational.

What is little understood outside of Catholic education is the multiple accountability that influences Catholic education and RE within this setting. If Catholic schools are to maintain the Catholic identity that makes these educational contexts unique, the ability to understand and to address issues about the quality of RE within Catholic primary schools is imperative. Consequently, many stakeholders have a mutual interest in the continued vitality and excellence of RE as a key learning area. As well as Catholic school based concerns (validated by school websites and SIPs), there are now expectations of parents and the wider Church community for "better" RE.

In the Catholic primary setting, the increasing pressure to ensure that schools are ongoing learning communities where they become places for both students and teachers to

learn is paralleled by momentum at the federal policy level. In Australia, teacher education is certainly in the political spotlight as demonstrated by recent widespread media saturation that highlights the need to strengthen accountability and improve teacher quality. The highly publicised *Welcome to Better Schools: A National Plan for School Improvement* (Australian Government Budget, 2013-2014) validates a concern and priority for improved teacher education. Against this background, this research in the field of primary RE, investigated how RECs lead or may lead professional learning to develop RE teachers professionally and so increase their effectiveness in the RE classroom.

RE classroom teachers have constantly drawn on support from school leaders, especially the REC in their work of program development (Dowling, 2012; Nolen, 2008). However, in the Melbourne context, the researcher had observed some reluctance and certain issues related to the leadership and support of professional learning for RE teachers in the primary Catholic context. As there was little empirical evidence to inform this problem, this research provided a timely opportunity for a more substantial investigation into this phenomenon. This study explored the leadership role of the REC with a particular focus on ways that these RE curriculum leaders enact leadership of professional learning for RE classroom teachers in Catholic primary school settings. The research problem was addressed through an overarching question and an exploration of related sub questions. An overview of the study is provided in the following Table.

Table 8.1. presents these research questions and aligns them with the aims of the study and the data collected.

Table 8.1.

Overview of the Study- Research Question, Aims and Data Collection

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators in Catholic primary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne		
Sub Questions	Aims	Data Collection
According to key stakeholders what models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of Religious Educators in Catholic primary schools?	<p>To better understand how RE teachers grow professionally and identify the conditions that support and promote this growth</p> <p>To clarify the conceptual and practical issues relevant to the leadership responsibilities of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators</p>	<p>Stage one: classroom teachers</p> <p>Stage two: principals, RECs</p> <p>Stage three: principals, RECs, CEO representatives</p>
According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?	To examine the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead professional learning to reconceptualise the requirements needed to successfully lead staff and student learning in RE	<p>Stage two: principals and RECs</p> <p>Stage three: principals, RECs, CEO representatives</p>
According to key stakeholders what factors challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?	To examine the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead professional learning to reconceptualise the requirements needed to successfully lead staff and student learning in RE	<p>Stage two: principals and RECs</p> <p>Stage three: principals, RECs, CEO representatives</p>
How do key stakeholders (RE teachers, RECs principals and CEO representatives) perceive and value the leadership role of the REC in professional learning?	To identify the perceptions of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning	Stage one, two and three: classroom teachers, principals, RECs and CEO representatives.
	To identify implications for RE classroom teaching, school and public policy of approaches to and leadership of professional learning for religious educators in the Catholic primary context.	The focus of this chapter.
Overarching question: According to key stakeholders, how can RECs lead professional learning of primary RE teachers in the Melbourne Archdiocese to encourage teacher and student learning?		

Chapter two provided an analysis and synthesis of the relevant literature pertaining to this research. It highlighted that the issue of the leadership role of the REC in staff professional learning is increasingly problematic and suggested that there are more questions than answers in respect to the role of the REC in leading professional learning. These questions point to the fact that, as yet, there is not a clear understanding of the REC's leadership role in professional learning, or how this might be developed and supported in the context of the Catholic primary school. As research is concerned with advancing a field or discipline and contributing to its development or renewal (Gough, 2002), this research was preoccupied with questions of the leadership practice of the REC in staff and student learning. In this way the problem to be investigated, the sub questions posed, and the aims and data collected, all link directly with the findings, conclusions and recommendations provided in this final chapter.

Chapter three provided the conceptual framework for the study and situated this research as a qualitative study. This research adopted an epistemology of social constructionism. In this perspective, the ontology which involves questions concerning the nature of being and reality is, that there is no objective truth awaiting discovery. Such ontology maintains that there are multiple realities, rather than one objective reality. Constructionism enables understanding of how the story is constructed and who contributes to the meaning-making and meaning sharing. The epistemological framework of constructionism was adopted for this study as the individual and shared realities of the REC as leaders in professional learning underpinned the study.

The theoretical perspective chosen for this study was interpretivism; symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2007) was a particularly appropriate lens of interpretivism for this research. According to the principles of symbolic interactionism, each individual is comprised of multiple selves or multiple 'Me's', which can exist individually, or simultaneously, as well as change over time. This has been described as "Who I am depends on which Me is experienced as most salient at the time" (Bowers, 1989, p. 37). For RECs in this study therefore, it was possible to express a different identity that is as co-ordinator/leader in RE. For such people, at times one aspect of a person's identity can be more salient than the other or both can be salient depending on the circumstances (Bowers, 1989).

The research strategy most suited to addressing the research questions was GT. The overall interpretivist perspective achieved a consistency between the direction of the research, the data collection and data analysis. Chapter three justified how in this study GT was employed to inductively build a substantive theory regarding the leadership responsibility of the REC for professional learning and the opportunities for staff and student learning in RE.

In Chapters four to seven, data from the anonymous online surveys, focus groups and interviews were examined and analysed. As a result several issues concerning the leadership of professional learning in RE emerged. The strategies used to verify the data and its subsequent analysis have been detailed in Chapter three of this thesis.

Conclusions, Consolidated Theory and Final Recommendations

Models/approaches to professional learning

The initial data from RE classroom practitioners and RECs pointed to conditions that facilitate and support classroom religious educators and the REC in their role of leading and supporting educators and improving the quality of RE. Participants described the characteristics of high quality RE professional learning and why it should be valued. A host of available scholarship indicated strong effects on practice when professional learning focuses on enhancing teachers' knowledge of how to engage in specific pedagogical skills and how to teach specific kinds of content to learners (Rusch, 2008; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson & Orphanios, 2009). Supporting the literature, this study concluded that teachers of RE also learn and develop through a combination of content mastery and a command of a broad set of relevant pedagogic skills which deepen RE teachers' knowledge of content and how to teach it to RE students.

This study confirmed that RE teachers require professional competence in specific areas and that they have a responsibility to develop both a critical, technical knowledge of their content and the pedagogical competence to bring the insights of contemporary scholarship to their teaching of RE. The repeated pedagogical requests of participants indicated a concern to incorporate greater attention to the contemporary *educational* dimensions of the RE discipline. These expectations were in line with contemporary RE scholarship and Church teachings. The study therefore, supported the contention in *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith [LCS]* (1982) that "(Teachers) should be trained with

particular care, so that they may be enriched with both secular and religious knowledge, appropriately certified and may be equipped with an educational skill which reflects modern day findings” (SCCE, 1982, n. 46). This study showed that RE professional learning must be closely linked to local system RE curriculum requirements and the RE classroom. However, the sub categories identified in this study should be taken as sources of insight and ideas, not as proven best practice which can be universally applied.

The diverse RE participants in this study reflected the idiosyncratic and individual nature of RE teacher professional growth. Various types of professional learning were identified as being needed to meet the different requirements and stages of learning as evident in a school RE staff. Whilst these findings help to understand the process by which RE teachers grow professionally and the conditions and requirements which support this growth in the primary RE context, there is uniqueness in each RE learning context that needs to be respected. To repeat or copy the same approaches, process and practices with every group of RE teachers does not respect the variation in experience, skills and understandings, which necessarily exist. Further, the researcher has now learned that support for the process of RE teacher growth must offer RE teachers every opportunity to learn in a fashion that each RE teacher, (regardless of year level, career stage, background, RE knowledge/experience) finds most useful for their immediate RE classroom needs. This study has found particular value in the capacity of collaborative, practical RE professional learning designed to stimulate RE classroom practice and student learning. Yet, it also offers more evidenced based professional learning activities as yet unexplored and unexploited in the RE domain.

The context in which RE teachers and RECs work can have a substantial impact on their RE professional growth. The Catholic school context can impinge on the RE teachers’ professional growth at every stage of their learning, access to opportunities for PL, restriction or support for participation, encouragement or discouragement to experiment with new RE teaching techniques and administrative restrictions or support in the long term application of new ideas. This emphasis was repeated in every data gathering phase. The context of the school therefore is a source of constraint, resources and opportunities that the REC must understand and address in order to lead. This study revealed the importance of having carefully planned, monitored and delivered RE professional learning opportunities. An RE “learning community” operates under different guises and can involve RE staff in different networks of learning, sometimes in collaboration within individuals, teams, levels and

schools, sometimes in collaboration between schools, sometimes in collaboration with “experts”. However, there are variations when it comes to identifying, understanding and responding to effective RE professional learning in Catholic primary schools which have key implications connected to, the purpose, the organisation, the context, conditions and relational elements of RE professional learning opportunities.

Within the professional learning literature a common theme emerged as the contingency of success for professional learning, and that was a distinct focus on improved student learning. This was epitomised by Hargraves (2011), who stated:

Professional learning is not an end in itself, it is, or at least it should be, a means to an end and that end is improved student learning outcomes. The prime object is to improve what teachers and school leader do, not merely what they know (p. 9).

What has emerged in this study are perspectives based on the views of key experienced practitioners. Whilst there was much evidence of what was described as “good practice”, the important driver of improved student outcomes was a long way from being truly captured. Moreover, if as has been argued in this thesis, RE is comparable to other key learning areas (cf., Chapter one), then evidence based professional learning needs to be given a higher profile. Further, there is an urgent need for RE leaders to be able to identify if ongoing adjustments to RE staff teaching practices will maximize student outcomes (Selinger & Beckingham, 2004). Increased efforts to rigorously monitor and evaluate professional learning offerings may help to ensure that these learning opportunities are geared toward obtaining some/more evidence about student learning in RE. This more evaluative approach would enact the recent sentiments of DEECT (2013) *From New Directions to Action: World Class teaching and School leadership* which advocated the need to create a high performance profession: stimulate a culture of excellence and effective professional development. This clearly stipulated the need to “build robust performance and development processes, collaborative teaching and reflection in our schools” (DEECT, 2013, p. 13). This research demonstrated that this goal is especially required for RE in the primary context.

Perceptions revealed in this study demonstrated that in line with other discipline areas, increased consideration must be given to how to extend e-learning awareness/opportunities in the RE discipline. Based on the models/approaches to professional learning established in this study, RE teaching and learning online possibilities could be re-

designed to provide much flexibility to enable Catholic schools to use RE resources for their individual teacher and school-based professional learning needs. Whilst the literature review acknowledged that an ICT platform exists in the Melbourne context, no specific mention of RESource was made in this study by any of the various participants. This highlights a need for RE teachers and RECs to engage further with this material to develop a learning community and to reconsider ongoing professional learning opportunities which might exist in this forum.

Table 8.2. provides a summary of Research question 1, conclusions and consolidated theory. Immediately following this summary, important research based advice in the form of recommendations is provided to encourage RECs as leaders to become more influential in the RE field especially with regard to enhancing the quality of teaching, learning and student outcomes in RE.

Table 8.2.

Summary of Research Question 1, Conclusions and Consolidated theory

Research question: According to key stakeholders what models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools?	
Aim: To better understand how RE teachers grow professionally and identify the conditions that support and promote this growth.	
Conclusions	Some Consolidated theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RE teachers respected professional learning if they learn more about the subject they teach and how students learn this subject. Many elements of effective professional learning identified in the literature can be transferred to the RE setting. RE teachers especially valued the need for collaboratively integrating theory and practice in the learning process to make professional learning relevant to the RE classroom. Quality delivery, curriculum supports, resources, input and partnerships were non-negotiables for RE teachers. Leaders must pay careful attention to the way RE professional learning is presented, organised, supported, monitored and evaluated. 	<p>Professional learning opportunities that are directly linked to RE classroom teaching and student learning thereby allow RE teachers to construct and reconstruct the RE curriculum.</p> <p>RE teachers need a practical, collaborative and evidence based focus to improve their RE practice. Given this imperative, the quality and relevance of some learning opportunities remains a significant concern for some RE teachers and RECs, with their dissatisfaction stemming from the perceived lack of interaction with significant issues of RE teaching practice.</p> <p>Any RE learning partnerships should be reviewed and strengthened by ensuring RE teachers have some agency and input into the opportunities and reviews.</p>
Aim: To clarify the conceptual and practical issues relevant to the leadership responsibilities of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovative use of knowledge, information, resources and opportunities are needed to build on RE teacher professionalism in formal and informal ways. ICT professional learning is not well accepted, understood or appreciated with RE. However the adoption of technology as an interactive professional learning tool could provide a platform where RE staff learn in a practical way, devise and share web friendly RE curriculum content, upload content and research the RE program. Key contextual forces directly affect the success and engagement of RE teachers to experiment and evaluate their RE classroom practices. Opportunities for the REC to learn with RE staff heightened opportunities to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of RE practices. All RE teachers need to become more accountable to each other and to their students. How RE educators learn in and through their RE practice and the extent and direct impact of this to RE student learning, remains to a large extent, an unknown quantity. Whilst the REC can promote professional learning, it is important to simultaneously accentuate the need for RE staff to take responsibility for the transfer of their learning to the RE classroom. 	<p>RE teachers should be recommended towards reliable, contemporary and scholarly professional learning input, which are relevant and appropriate to their RE classroom.</p> <p>Quality RE teaching practice models online need a better profile. RE professional practice could be strengthened by sharing and showcasing new ideas through a user friendly, online learning environment.</p> <p>Meaningful RE discussion, planning and practice will not occur without structural supports and encouragement and ongoing monitoring and evaluation. RECs must take seriously the challenge of providing a range of professional learning experiences that have the potential to challenge and assist them to empathise with RE staff and to understand what is involved in providing for deep learning in RE.</p> <p>The quality of professional learning experiences can be shaped by the active intervention of RECs and school leaders with a shared and realistic commitment to improved student learning in RE. Now RECs must consider <i>the extent</i> to which RE teachers feel supported and challenged to consider ways to enhance their RE practice.</p> <p>RE teachers need to be actively encouraged and supported to develop self-regulatory skills which will enable them to monitor and reflect on the effectiveness of changes to their RE practice.</p>

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- All stakeholders responsible for quality RE consult closely and regularly, with the aim to continually improve the provision of RE professional learning in Catholic primary schools.
- All stakeholders responsible for quality RE find ways to strengthen and grow learning partnerships within, beyond, and among Catholic schools to ensure RE teachers have many, varied and productive opportunities and incentives to enact professional learning which are relevant and applicable to their RE classrooms.
- RE stakeholders increase encouragement and engagement with RE online communities of practice and continuing online professional learning within and beyond schools/universities/CEOs. Consideration of rebranding the RE online learning environment to more clearly reflect the role and value of technology which allows for participatory, collaborative and ongoing, interactive professional learning. For practising RE teachers at all stages of their career, online content, resources and stimulus may translate into a library of innovative resources. The site can provide RE teachers with online space for communication, collaboration and online mentoring to motivate and support one another to better teaching and learning in RE.
- Organisers of RE professional learning experiences promote ongoing evaluation and closer collaboration with RE participants to help bridge any perceived deficiencies and to develop professional trust. Organisers must differentiate support in light of RE staff needs, priorities, strengths, weaknesses and circumstances.
- RE leaders in Catholic schools collaboratively examine and consider the extent to which the Catholic school might resource and facilitate processes which support RE teachers' ongoing learning with a view to improved student learning.
- All school leaders demonstrate undeviating determination to ensure that all RE professional learning opportunities are well planned, promoted, managed, organised and supervised. RE school leaders engage more strategically in determining how they can enhance and activate RE teachers' capacities to understand, appreciate and self regulate the transfer of their professional learning to the RE classroom. The challenge is not only to empower RE teachers to transfer professional learning to the RE classroom but to help RE teachers understand the implications of such evidence for their improvement efforts.

Factors that Support Leadership of Professional Learning

Whilst leadership in curriculum and student learning were identified as key aspects of the REC's role (cf., Chapter two), this study established some key considerations which support the REC to carry out these responsibilities. Moreover it suggested that these influences need synchronisation if RECs are to both support and challenge RE teachers' professional practice and assist them to be held accountable for achieving quality learning in RE.

Leadership support

All those entrusted with leadership positions (principal, leadership team, PP) in the Catholic primary school must be conspicuous in their support and promotion of RE. However, differing from previous studies, this study has also broadened this support to the local PP. The behaviour and encouragement of the principal especially, acts as a key factor in the extent to which RECs as middle leaders (Bennet et al., 2007; Busher et al., 2007) are enabled to act as leaders in RE educational endeavours. A leadership presence, commitment and dedication to the discipline of RE can act somewhat like a bridge, linking the concerns of the REC, with the professional duties and concerns of RE staff. This will ensure that RE is embedded in the learning agenda of the school and not on the periphery. The study identified concrete ways in which the REC, leadership teams and the PP worked together to promote the principles of teacher learning and to improve the RE educational experience and outcomes for staff and students. There is now a series of irrefutable evidence (Buchanan, 2010; 2007; Harvey, 2009; Healy, 2011) that these parties can support and empower the REC in their leadership role. This study highlighted that all leaders are an integral part of any RE educational efforts. Expectations and accountability measures also emerged as a major focus for leadership activity. Mirroring the findings of Robinson, et al., (2008), Catholic primary school leadership should provide active oversight and evaluation of the RE teaching program.

Shared responsibility

Closely intertwined with the former category, was the need for a shared responsibility to build RE teacher capacity and professional culture. If Catholic primary schools are to realise continuous improvement in the quality of RE teaching and learning in the classrooms, then responsibility extends beyond leadership and encompasses the need to build the capacity of all RE teachers. This demands a mutual and shared responsibility to ensure that RE educators

within schools engage in continuous professional learning and apply that learning to increase student achievement in RE. The effort to champion a distinctive educational focus in RE is a shared leadership responsibility which must be actively supported throughout the school and with other RE stakeholders.

Staff understanding and engagement in RE

This research highlighted the need for the REC as a leader, to understand how to promote, contribute to and respond to RE staff requests as a stimulus to improved student learning in RE. This study therefore reiterated the value of integrating teachers' genuine needs and concerns into the focus of their professional learning offerings (Deppler, 2007; Tudball, 2007). Respect and acknowledgement is needed that RE teachers have individual needs, different motivations for learning and prior knowledge and experience that can have an impact on the type of RE learning they choose to engage in. There was emerging consensus that efforts to know, appreciate and enable RE staff can encourage and support both engagement with, and application of professional learning experiences.

RECs' ongoing personal and professional learning needs.

The rhetoric of professional learning has taken as almost axiomatic the necessity to model LLL. This study reiterated that the REC can only be a genuine leader of professional learning to the extent that he/she fulfils this function themselves. By modelling desired dispositions and actions, RECs may enhance others' beliefs about their own capacities and enthusiasm for RE.

System and structural supports

The study reinforced that working conditions matter a great deal to teaching and learning in RE and the RECs confidence, ability and opportunities to lead professional learning. However this study highlighted that the extent to which a Catholic school promotes the conditions for effective professional learning, depends largely on the organisational parameters dictated by the CEO and school leadership. Demands for directives/guidelines that could be assigned to professional learning in RE as a key learning area, to ensure that opportunities to build RE teachers' capacity for lifelong learning can succeed were matched by the challenge for the CEOs and Commissions to provide quality direction and leadership without dominating local initiative and ownership. This research reminds RE organisations

and leaders that resources, processes and supports need to be in place to enable RE teachers to plan, teach and reflect well so that teacher and student learning can be enhanced. Strategic efforts will boost the reputation and credibility of RE as a discipline area.

In summary it has become evident that a critical ingredient in the search for quality teaching in RE is having educational leaders and RE staff that push the boundaries of modern RE teaching and learning, try new things to improve practice and are fully supported in doing so. Through this research many practical ways in which RECs as leaders can develop the knowledge, skills and understanding of staff to improve the teaching and learning of RE have been revealed. This research clearly demonstrated RECs as leaders should be given every opportunity to positively influence staff and student learning in RE. The central questions for each Catholic school to consider are what supports are needed to enable the REC in their leadership of learning and how these can be met in the local context. The study also highlighted the urgency for a shared responsibility of principals, RECs and system authorities in the contemporary construction of the effective leadership role of the REC in professional learning in Catholic primary schools.

Table 8.3. provides a summary of Research question 2a, conclusions and consolidated theory.

Table 8.3.

Summary of Research Question 2a, Conclusions and Consolidated theory

Research question: According to key stakeholders what factors strengthen the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?	
Aim: To examine the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead professional learning to reconceptualise the requirements needed to successfully lead staff and student learning in RE	
Conclusions	Some Consolidated theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership commitment (REC and other leaders) to the ongoing professional growth of RE staff is required in the pursuit of quality RE. Need for a combined and sustained effort of RE leaders (RECs and other Catholic school leaders) to model, develop and promote teacher professionalism and teamwork in RE. 	<p>All leaders should be visible, active and supportive of educational leadership in RE. They must advocate for and educate about the priority of quality RE in the Catholic primary school.</p> <p>Leading professional learning needs people located in all aspects of school life but also needs a shared orientation and mandate that transcends the school and is joined up in some way with broader efforts to pursue best practice in RE.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared learning partnerships make the job of the REC more manageable and help to improve student learning in RE. Shared learning partnerships build the leadership capacity of others. 	<p>Shared responsibility means that Catholic schools work to develop a collaborative culture of clear and high expectations of continuous professional learning in RE. There needs to be shared clarity and detail in the way this is undertaken.</p> <p>School leaders should provide opportunities for RE teachers with an interest in and potential for curriculum leadership to develop and demonstrate their skills as leaders.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RECs must know how to engage RE teachers and students in effective learning. In recognising RE staff needs, the REC is better informed to establish the conditions that enable others to be effective RE teachers. Effective RE professional learning depends largely on how all staff conceive, plan and implement it. 	<p>An REC should be a highly skilled practitioner, while challenging others to continue to be the same.</p> <p>Respect for RE staff and concern about their feelings and needs can accommodate individual learning and become a realistic means for ongoing monitoring of professional learning.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The REC should provide an example for RE staff and others to follow that is consistent with the long term vision for improved teaching and ongoing learning in RE. RECs need to grow their leadership in formal and informal ways. 	<p>Catholic schools must resource and facilitate processes which support REC leadership through professional learning practice, RE professional learning and formal leadership development. The more RECs continue to actively grow their educational knowledge, skills, expertise and leadership experience the better equipped and more credible they will be as leaders of RE learning.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local conditions and system supports should be organised and conducive for RE teachers to continuously improve their RE teaching practice. Guaranteed planning time, additional curriculum supports and resources can promote RE teacher effectiveness and student learning. 	<p>Leadership of professional learning in RE can be strengthened with availability and access to innovative, contemporary resources/structures and personnel which can be used to promote and support quality teacher and student learning.</p> <p>System and structural supports/resources enable RE capacity building to become a reality by creating the conditions for professional growth.</p>

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

Leadership support

- All Catholic school leaders value, support and enact quality RE professional learning and welcome opportunities to work in partnership to build the profile and practice of RE.

Shared responsibility

- All Catholic primary schools develop shared responsibility to enhance the perception of RE and to encourage ongoing opportunities for professional learning of RE educators.
- Stakeholders at all levels (system and school) take collective responsibility for ensuring that all RE teachers are well prepared, and have and use all available knowledge/opportunities to inform their RE professional practice.
- All stakeholders responsible for RE in a Catholic primary school become active agents to champion the educational dimension of the REC role. Collaborative partnerships within and across Catholic schools are needed to develop RE curriculum.

Staff understanding and engagement in RE

- Each REC, in conjunction with their school leaders, be highly visible and available to challenge and support RE staff learning. This may require a high degree of social skills to develop and negotiate relationships with RE staff in a climate of honesty, openness, innovation and trust.

RECs ongoing personal and professional learning needs.

- Catholic primary schools develop a collective responsibility for leadership learning by promoting opportunities to mentor, coach and learn with and from other RE learners/leaders. Principals and senior leadership staff must understand the possibilities and develop leadership across the RE school community. This signals the need for clear succession planning within and around Catholic schools.

- CEOs and Catholic schools extend current RE leadership development opportunities to specifically grow and develop the educational leadership of the REC and to transition others into the leadership role. The Annual Review Meeting (ARM) provides a means to track and support this growth. This will also recognise staff leadership, expertise and effectiveness as it develops over their career.

System and structural supports

- Both CEOs and Catholic schools develop and document clear policies, expectations and practices to define and pursue leadership of RE in the educational domain and regularly review them. This is integral to the appointment process, role description, and ARM and must be an imperative and not an option in each Catholic primary school.
- All RE stakeholders reconsider ways to promote, reward and credential excellence in RE practice for RE teachers.

The previous section identified effective practice from research and what Catholic primary schools have done to build the leadership capacity of the REC to promote teacher and student learning. It illustrated what should happen and can lead those responsible for RE to measure and monitor RE leadership progress. Not least, this study is a step towards developing a comprehensive set of leadership practices that better organise the learning of RE teachers and students to make the challenging work of religious educators more productive.

Whilst this research provided positive signs that some Catholic schools are developing sophisticated understandings of what constitutes effective leadership of RE learning, the next section of this chapter uncovers significant variation in both support and opportunity for leadership of professional learning among Catholic primary schools. This confirmed that some Catholic primary schools might need to pay more attention to success stories and studying approaches that support leadership of learning in RE.

Factors that Challenge Leadership of Professional Learning

Key challenges, contradictions and conflicts at both the macro and micro level, continue to mitigate against the integrity and optimum leadership of the REC's role in professional learning. It is now impossible to ignore the complex, intertwined and often self reinforcing nature of the causes of leadership in professional learning failure. Interestingly, these long standing challenges, were also validated by experts in the RE field (ACU, RE symposium, 2013) who also confirmed that more work remains to be done in this area.

Lack of leadership support and status

Incontrovertible in the international evidence base is the link between leadership and learning, yet it presented as a confounding factor in the leadership of quality of RE. This study revealed that without leadership status and support, RECs do not have the autonomy, power or influence to be a leader in professional learning.

Relationship with and expectations of PP/ diversity of teacher/ parent knowledge, affiliation and commitment.

These interrelated categories found expression in various guises including the diversity of teachers' knowledge, affiliation and commitment to RE and highlighted the need to re-examine the expectations of the REC and RE teachers. As a consequence, some reorientation in expectations and accountability may be negotiated based on greater collegiality, trust and respect. A shift in thinking and expectation of RE teachers and the REC must take into account the range of views/skills expressed by a wider number of RE staff/parents than has previously been the case. In this way, a close and mutually supportive relationship between the PP and REC can be built to support teachers/parents to grow positively in their role as religious educators. As all stakeholders have a mutual interest in the continued vitality and quality of RE, failure of any party to engage in a continuing constructive dialogue could well spell disaster for RE staff and students.

Prohibitive school structures

If appropriate conditions are not in place for extended collaborative engagement that in depth professional learning requires, any leadership efforts to improve the quality of RE will be in vain. RECs called for a shared commitment to and ownership of this pursuit. This implies an

onus on Catholic schools that resources and structures be best deployed to raise educational achievement for all in the area of RE. It also suggests a need for the CEO to closely monitor, support and challenge Catholic schools to provide the necessary conditions and supports for teacher learning in RE.

Demands and Tensions of varying role expectations

This study confirmed that REC leadership positions carry with them conflicting demands. The ongoing, public and time consuming demands of liturgy and sacraments (Crotty, 1998; 2006) continue to be a reality today in Catholic primary schools. This raises questions about the support and focus needed for the crucial academic components of the RE discipline. The significance of this research is that it enlarges on both the perception and reality of the seeming dissonance between the expectations of the role of the REC. Given the strong educational focus in RE (cf., Chapters one and two) there are serious dangers that the educational aspect of RE (including its status and credibility as a rigorous academic pursuit) will be neglected or weakened unless this tension can be eradicated. Although past research (Buchanan, 2007; Crotty, 2005; Fleming, 2002) strongly signaled that the educational and ministerial dimensions of the role should not be in opposition to each other, this study demonstrated that previous recommendations to address this problem have not come to fruition. Whilst it is inappropriate to speculate why these recommendations have been ignored, this research reiterated the importance of the educational role of the REC especially in leading and supporting professional learning opportunities. The study endorsed the need to defy this longstanding limitation to the role. All participants voiced a keen interest to partner with other key stakeholders with interests in RE, to influence the policy and practice of the leadership dimensions of their responsibility, particularly in regards to raising and making explicit the educational elements of the role. Strong evidence from participants of their desire to make active and positive contributions to the status of the leadership role for the REC bodes well for the future.

A summary of this section which links the aims, conclusions and consolidated theory, is provided in Table 8.4.

Table 8.4.

Summary of Research Question 2b, Conclusions and Consolidated theory

Research question: According to key stakeholders what factors challenge the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in RE?	
Aim: To examine the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead professional learning to reconceptualise the requirements and conditions needed to successfully lead staff and student learning in RE	
Conclusions	Some Consolidated theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RECs only operate within given parameters. • An REC is intimately involved with negotiating and collaborating with key stakeholders (including the principal, leadership team, PP and colleagues) in order to gain their support. • Increased vision, understanding, support and status from key stakeholders of what REC educational leadership might involve and the scope of activities that could be undertaken, will enhance the efforts and influence of the REC. 	<p>Leadership success or otherwise for the REC in professional learning is very dependent on the leadership support of the principal, who still exercised an enormous power, even if this was simply to allow the REC to take responsibility and lead in this area.</p> <p>RECs need to negotiate the extent of their remit as a leader of professional learning as well as operate sensitively to extend their boundaries of leadership.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic expectations must be re-examined and revised. • Parameters of the REC role need clear definition. • The PP in partnership with the REC and school leaders, is charged with the challenge of responding with sensitivity, intelligence and educational skills to the concern for perceived RE staff deficiencies. Catholic primary schools may need to find new and better ways of entering learning partnerships and possibilities with RE staff to cater/compensate for both the diversity (and lack) of teachers' knowledge, affiliation and commitment to RE. 	<p>An awareness and appreciation of a great diversity of levels of readiness of RE staff must be matched by realistic expectations and supportive actions. This may require a significant commitment to ongoing professional learning and high levels of co-operation between key stakeholders.</p> <p>Time and a strategic, negotiated framework for staff development are needed for RE teachers to develop their potential. At this stage, it is difficult to specify what form this new relationship will take, but it is a question worth serious deliberation.</p> <p>Developing the educational leadership dimension of this partnership will require committed people with the appropriate support, time, and skill set to devote to the diverse and ongoing learning needs of the RE learning community.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School structures continue to inhibit the effective provision of school professional learning. • Catholic primary schools must identify and minimize areas of REC leadership vulnerability. • Catholic schools and the CEOs must monitor and evaluate the status and provision of professional learning opportunities in RE. 	<p>Whilst professional learning can obviously occur even when circumstances and conditions are less than ideal, there is limited scope for growth and development of RE teachers if their working environment and culture is not created and managed to counter many of the factors which can readily inhibit leadership/teacher growth.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecclesial and other activities add to the complexity of educational leadership required of the REC in the Catholic primary school. • Greater co-operation and more detailed planning among RE stakeholders can help overcome these long standing challenges. 	<p>The important educational dimension of the REC role must be preserved, if necessary, safeguarded and defended against other views, to ensure that Catholic schools do not polarise or neglect this vital dimension of the role. There is an urgent need for sustained and serious dialogue embedded in a commitment to building the educational dimension of the REC role.</p>

In light of the overarching question of this research, this study seeks to help reduce any barriers that RECs (and RE teachers) may face in their ongoing professional learning efforts. It is hoped that this study will be useful in providing other RE leaders with the skills of identifying, analysing and responding to the complex leadership challenges they may face. The following recommendations present a way forward.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

Lack of leadership status support

- As an imperative, System authorities, Church leaders, principals, and RECs, demonstrate a greater commitment to serious and ongoing dialogue between parties leading to a greater appreciation and better support of the complex leadership role of the REC in educational endeavours in the Catholic primary school. This may help build consensus about the core expectations of the RE leadership practice required to promote staff and student learning in RE. This collaboration may also communicate a strong belief in the capacity of the REC and RE teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning in RE.

Relationship and expectations of the PP

- Interested PPs be invited to be part of an educative process on setting clear roles and expectations for RECs' and RE teachers' responsibilities around the school/parish. In partnership, these parties can negotiate, consult and work together in order to better support the professional learning needs of RE staff. At the same time, this educative process could assist all parties to further understand and respond to the challenge of educational leadership in RE within the changing context of the contemporary Church.

Diversity of teachers' knowledge, affiliation and commitment to RE

- There be consultation between the CEO, parish and school leading to a clearly defined written agreement as to what is required of the RE staff and what supports are necessary to achieve these requirements. These priorities should be established, monitored and reviewed regularly. They should be negotiated as part of the ARM process and set within realistic parameters.

- System and school RE leaders further encourage RE staff to see the priority of RE and the value in professional learning for their classroom RE teaching practice. All RE teachers must be supported by those in leadership roles viz a viz support structures, time and resources which privilege the opportunities for ongoing learning and respect of diverse and ongoing RE learning needs.
- Increase co-operation between stakeholders who facilitate professional learning in RE to help, mentor, guide and empower RE staff. This will enable the professional learning of RE staff through roles that are personally satisfying and rewarding with opportunities for career progression. This needs to be coupled with ongoing support and patience.

Prohibitive school structures

- CEOs establish clear and defined parameters/guidelines regarding the leadership role of the RECs within the school and expectations of professional learning in RE. These must be open to local circumstances and negotiable by employing authorities, principals and relevant personnel.

Demands/tensions of varying expectations of the REC role

- Each Catholic primary school collaboratively develop guiding principles/practices to clarify and honour the educational leadership dimension of the REC role. Unless all stakeholders can achieve some minimal clarity on this matter, Catholic primary schools may never know what RECs as educational leaders are to aim at and what could be achieved. Schools should then identify and implement strategic actions to enable the guiding principles to be enacted.
- School leadership teams embrace and discuss ways in which effective RE leadership can be acquired through intentional leadership development efforts. Both RECs and aspiring RECs need opportunities and agency to focus on the challenges of improving student learning and RE program implementation.

Perceptions of the Leadership Role of the REC in Professional Learning.

All stakeholders reported that *ideally* RECs as subject leaders were expected to encourage, inspire and educate their RE colleagues as RECs have a shared responsibility for the quality

of RE in the Catholic primary school. The study revealed a substantial regard for the REC as a leader of professional learning. Participants confirmed that RECs are curriculum and pedagogical leaders and must not only “support” but “lead” RE professional learning initiatives. Paradoxically different stakeholders regarded the improvement of the RECs leadership capacity as a top priority and an area where more has to be done.

While arguably, leadership of professional learning has attained its rightful place in literature and to some extent, in associated written documentation of Catholic schools and some CEOs, its application for RECs in Catholic schools as a legitimate form of leadership is yet to be fully realised. However, just as the *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership* (AITSL, 2011) promotes the importance of a performance and development culture, it appears that leadership standards must also be upheld in RE. The many discrepancies and variation present in this study was undermined by the uncertainty about how to maximise their influence.

Moreover, the challenge of how the REC can help to deliver and support effective professional learning in RE which has, as its contingency student learning, remains largely unresolved. The study confirmed that some Catholic primary schools are squandering opportunities to attain improvements in RE teacher knowledge and practice. This study demonstrated that there are several good reasons for a continuing failure to seriously tackle leadership of learning in RE, despite the lip service paid to “quality” RE as a goal both in local Catholic school, and system (CEO) official documentation. Without an agreed definition of leadership of professional learning, which is developed, communicated and implemented, it appears in the face of challenges, that some schools may be more inclined to deal in rhetoric than the substance of quality leadership of learning in RE.

Compounding this situation, whilst Church documents and RE scholars/researchers have signalled that RE professional learning endeavours need to be as rigorous and equivalent to other key learning domains within the Catholic primary school, this study confirmed an urgent need to close the gap between the rhetoric and practice of professional learning in Catholic schools to ensure that RE retains its rightful place. This presented as possibly the single most difficult problem to resolve.

Table 8.5. provides a summary of Research question 3, conclusions and consolidated theory.

Table 8.5.

Summary of Research Question 3, Conclusions and Consolidated theory

Research question: How do key stakeholders perceive and value the leadership role of the REC in professional learning?	
Aim: To identify the perceptions of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning	
Conclusions	Some Consolidated theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst some RECs are given an increasingly central role in RE educational initiatives their leadership influence must be actively grown. • In practice, much remains to be learned about <i>implementing</i> the factors that support and promote leadership of staff learning in RE. 	<p>RECs as leaders of learning undertake multiple roles, depending on their positions, expertise and opportunities within their school context.</p>
Aim: To examine the activities, conditions and situations in which RECs lead professional learning to reconceptualise the requirements needed to successfully lead staff and student learning in RE.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RECs as leaders need to be more focussed on teaching, learning and people. • There is potential for middle tier leaders (in this study the REC) to support and drive and in other cases, to hinder and obstruct effective professional learning. • Disparity between how teaching and learning is situated in RE compared with other key subjects must be eliminated because of the repercussions for the quality of teaching and learning in RE. • Increase support of the explicit and intentional presence and place of RE within the Catholic primary school 	<p>In establishing a case for building RE teacher learning through REC leadership in a Catholic primary school, a key factor for deliberation is the extent to which the system and school recognise and promote the educational leadership role of the REC.</p> <p>Regular opportunities for dialogue must be organised to discuss and promote</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) the status and priority of RE within the Catholic primary school, and b) the RECs' active involvement in the educational agenda of the primary school.

It is hoped that this research and recommendations can contribute to establishing a sense of ownership and possible consensus from key stakeholders about the leadership requirements of the REC in professional learning.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Like the recently researched Standards for RE teachers (Engebretson & Grajzonek, 2012), an equivalent public statement which sets out what RECs as leaders are expected to know, understand and do to achieve improved student learning in RE is developed.
- Strong ongoing partnerships between RE stakeholders (possibly including bishops, Diocesan employing authorities, ACU and principals'/RECs' professional associations) be developed to collaboratively explore and create shared understandings of what it means to be a leader of learning in RE in a Catholic school. This will also provide a forum to be proactive in investigating the long-term issues identified in this study and seeking creative solutions.

Limitations of the Study

This present study was limited to the experiences of leading professional learning in RE as it has developed in the context of Melbourne Catholic primary schools. Ultimately the research undertaken for this thesis was only able to give a partial picture of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning as perspectives were based on the key stakeholders who agreed to participate in this study. Although measures were put in place to maximize credibility, it is possible that different investigators with different groups of participants would have had different findings. However it was able to give voice to key stakeholders entrusted with the goal of quality RE including their frustrations as well as their supports and ideals, their concerns as well as their vision.

Another potential limitation was that data was being collected within a limited time frame. In order to pursue a depth of understanding regarding the leadership role of RECs in professional learning, which was the focus, a restricted range of participants constrained the extent and depth of exploration possible. Consequently, there are bound to be aspects of religious educational leadership practice and organisational culture that were not revealed. Whilst the influence of the PP on the effective leadership role of the REC in professional learning became apparent, a perspective from PPs was not included in this study. However, as this study was not envisaged as being definitive, it has identified areas that will be useful

to explore in further studies. Notwithstanding the limitations noted above, it is legitimate to claim that this study has made an important contribution to the knowledge base on the leadership role of the REC in professional learning in Catholic primary schools and this contention is established in the next section.

Significance of the Research

This study contributes to the available literature related to this topic and complements similar research conducted in other contexts. The research in this study extends previous Australian research about the role of the REC (Healy, 2011; Buchanan, 2007; Crotty, 2002; Fleming, 2002), as this focused on the leadership role of the REC in regards to ongoing professional learning in Catholic primary schools. Until now, whilst there has been growing interest and research about the role of the REC in leading curriculum change, there was little research specific to the professional learning of RE staff outside of the parameters of major curriculum change. Further, there is virtually no published research detailing the leadership contribution of the REC specific to staff and student learning. This lack of published research has serious implications for Australian religious educators in Catholic primary schools. If religious educators are resolute in their efforts to foster and promote student learning, then it is imperative that professional learning be better known and understood so that those designated responsibility for RE, namely RECs, can deliberately plan for and lead opportunities that enhance both staff and student growth.

Given that there has been an incomplete and limited understanding of the potential of the REC to lead professional learning in the primary context, the learning's from this study have provided a unique and powerful opportunity to shape and support the leadership role of the REC in the ongoing pursuit of quality RE. The outcomes of the research are applicable to current REC's and aspiring REC's and all those interested and responsible for increased student learning in RE. This study provided deeper understandings of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning and generated theory to support leadership of religious educators and student learning. The theory generated in this study provides a basis on which additional aspects of the leadership of professional learning in RE might be researched.

This research may influence three aspects of the RE landscape, namely, (i) theory, (ii) policy and (iii) practice.

- i) The findings from this study can translate the implications of theory to Catholic primary RE settings. This research is also noteworthy because it has the potential to be applied beyond its immediate context, that of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. In recent times, various Australian dioceses (for example the diocese of Ballarat) have expressed great interest in building the leadership capacity of the REC. The study can be replicated in other dioceses of Australia. Some of the findings may have wider implications beyond Australia.
- ii) The findings grounded in the realities of RE stakeholders, may inform and influence policy decisions about the structure, practices and processes for effective leadership of professional learning in RE. The comprehensive evidence based categories could be used to explore options that will allow each Catholic school to leverage its strengths and meet the challenges that lie ahead in each context.
- iii) Practice may be influenced as the data from this study offers a perspective gathered from key stakeholders in the RE field about which models of professional learning and REC leadership could be recommended. The different participants (and RE experts) offered suggestions based on their experiences and wisdom that could be more practical and relevant to meet the needs of primary school communities.

This research is beneficial to all those responsible for classroom RE and student learning- classroom teachers RECs, principals, key stakeholders in Catholic schools and the CEO where the insights gained about the potential of the leadership role of the REC can be drawn upon to advance thinking and practice in the highly specialised area of the RE classroom.

In any research project there are areas of interest that must be left to other researchers. In drawing together some of the current knowledge and practice concerning the role of the REC in the leadership of RE professional learning, we are left with some questions that are important to consider in further investigations. Even though much research has consistently showed the importance of good leadership in ensuring curriculum improvement and quality teaching and learning, there are still many gaps in the knowledge about successful leadership

in RE professional learning. The subsequent sections of this chapter offer some leads for further exploration.

Recommendations for Further Research

From this research process, it is clear that there are many opportunities to extend and expand on this current research. To include them all would have broadened the research scope to an unmanageable level and possibly resulted in less effective coverage and understanding of the key question posed in the present research. For the purposes of responding to the research questions, the methods used provided a sound vehicle for developing deeper understanding of the potential of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. This research expresses the hope that there would be continuing analysis of developments and trends in RECs' as leaders of the RE curriculum. However, there are many relevant and interesting issues emanating from this study that provide fertile ground for future research.

In this study, the leadership of professional learning was analysed from the perspective of the classroom teachers, RECs, principals and CEO personnel. Further research could explore the influence/perspectives of the PP, Pastoral associate and other leadership team members. The study also indicated that many participants assumed RE to be the same as other subject areas of a Catholic school's curriculum (by, for example, applying the outcomes based philosophy and language of other subject areas to RE), yet much evidence contradicted this assumption and this anomaly warrants urgent and thorough attention. It would be valuable to explore further some implicit themes which emerged that queried the nature and practical application of RE professional learning (e.g., courses offered at the University). This is an area recommended for further research.

Final Conclusion

Australian Catholics have demonstrated a long term interest in the quality of RE in Catholic schools from the time of European settlement. This emphasis on Catholic schools as foundations of the Church community means that RE teachers have inherited a legacy that sees their work with RE in schools as critical for the vibrancy of the Catholic community of the future. Leadership, quality teaching and learning and committed action is as crucial now

as it has ever been in the history of Catholic schooling. There is much cause for hope and energetic action when RE stakeholders consider the possibilities opened up by this research. RE stakeholders at all levels must increasingly recognise the importance of leading and providing high quality learning opportunities to help transform RE teaching.

In Chapter one, the researcher highlighted the influence of Senge's notion of learning organisations. This researcher believes the richness of the data collected provides an excellent opportunity to "relook" and see in new ways (Senge, et al., 2006) and from new perspectives the potential of the leadership role of the REC in the educational endeavours of RE programs in the Catholic primary school. This research demonstrated that there is much to be learned from RE stakeholders willing to redefine traditional paradigms of RE leadership and learning. A strong vision and commitment and a real understanding and appreciation of how the REC as a leader can extend, expand, amplify and create quality professional learning opportunities for RE staff is needed. However, this research contends that building the leadership capacity of the REC in professional learning in primary Catholic schools, while by no means easy, can be both better understood and accomplished. This can only occur if all stakeholders are committed to improving the quality of teaching in Catholic primary schools and to recognising, celebrating and sharing quality RE leadership/teacher practices.

Continued thoughtful, reflective and collaborative discussion based on robust local evidence and experience from different RE stakeholders, may lead to actions which strengthen the leadership role of the REC who can, in turn, positively influence quality teaching and student learning in RE. Consequently, it is hoped that this study may be particularly useful for all key stakeholders concerned with the quality of RE who seek to implement and evaluate RE leadership and professional learning and thus continue to improve the quality of the subject in Catholic primary schools.

Finally, this research has highlighted how the REC as an educational leader is providing a lens through which to reconceptualise leadership of learning in RE. Indeed, the active leadership of the REC in the educational activities of the RE program has been reported as a fundamental requirement of bringing about quality RE. Strong leadership, quality professional learning and improved teacher and student learning in RE will always remain a high priority in Catholic schools. The challenge for Australian Catholic primary schools now is to make it happen!

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letter of Introduction from the Researcher to Participants.



INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS (RECs /FOCUS GROUPS)

TITLE OF PROJECT: Leading Professional Learning

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Kath Engebretson

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Elizabeth Dowling

PROGRAMME IN WHICH ENROLLED: Doctor of Education

Dear Participant,

I am writing in regard to my forthcoming research project entitled *Leading Professional Learning*. The proposed research involves an exploration of the leadership role of the Religious Education Coordinator (REC) in the professional learning of religious educators in Catholic primary schools. This research seeks to better understand the potential of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning. I am seeking your approval to interview you in a focus group.

The proposed study will explore the perceptions, expectations and experiences of leading professional learning and the opportunities for this in the context of Catholic primary schools. Through surveys, focus groups and unstructured interviews with key stakeholders in Religious Education, this study seeks to provide deeper understandings of the leadership role of the REC in professional learning and to generate theory to support leadership of religious educators and student learning.

I have attached a letter from the Director of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne and ACU indicating their approval to approach you to participate in this study. As part of Stage two of the research I wish to conduct two focus groups with 6 RECs from Catholic primary schools. With the approval of your Principal, I would like to invite you to participate in these focus groups. You would be a most valuable person to participate in this study because of your experience as REC leading professional learning in Catholic primary settings. You are invited to participate in a focus group of one hour duration designed as a process of collecting data through group interviews with 5 other RECs that are structured to foster talk among the participants about the subject of interest, leading professional learning. There would be minimal inconvenience and interruption to your school and to yourself. I shall negotiate a mutually convenient time and central venue for interested participants. The focus group interview will be tape-recorded with permission.

The focus group will discuss a number of general questions regarding the leadership of professional learning in Religious Education like the following:

- How can REC leadership best enable professional learning for primary religious educators?

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CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B



- How do RECs view their educational leadership responsibilities in Religious Education?
- How can the educational leadership of the REC strengthen the connection between professional learning and the Religious Education classroom practice?

In order to best prepare for the focus group closer to the proposed time I shall forward questions to you to focus and direct the discussion and interaction with other group members.

There are no risks to your school or to you by participating.

It is hoped that the findings maybe particularly useful to all stakeholders interested in the quality of Religious Education including Catholic Education Offices, principals, RECs and most particularly Religious Education staff and students.

Confidentiality will be maintained and your identity will be known only to the researcher. In the future, the substance of the focus groups will be used in the thesis and published materials in a way that does not at all identify the school or participants involved. The schools confidentiality and yours as a participant will be maintained at all times.

Participants are free to refuse to take part in the research without having to justify that decision, or to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the study at any time without giving a reason. In addition, you will be able to withdraw any comments that you made up to the time that the researcher begins to analyse the data.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions regarding this project and your involvement in it. These queries should be directed to:

Elizabeth (Liz) Dowling (Student researcher)
School of Education (Victoria)
Australian Catholic University Limited
115 Victoria Parade (Locked Bag 4115)
FITZROY VIC 3065
Ph: (+61 3) 9953 3279
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Kath Engebretson (Supervisor)
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This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

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In the event that you have any complaint or concern, or if you have any query that the Investigators have not been able to satisfy, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the nearest branch of the Research Services Office.

VIC: Chair, HREC
C/- Research Services
Australian Catholic University
Melbourne Campus
Locked Bag 4115
FITZROY VIC 3065

Any complain or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in Stage two of this project, you should sign both copies of the Consent Forms enclosed, retain one copy for your records and return the other to the Student Researcher, Liz Dowling.

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If you include some contact details I will communicate with you directly to negotiate the details of the proposed focus groups

With kind regards,

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CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B

Appendix 2: Copy of the Consent Forms for persons participating in the research



Australian Catholic University Limited
ABN 15 050 192 660
Melbourne Campus (St Patrick's)
115 Victoria Parade Fitzroy VIC 3065
Locked Bag 4115 Fitzroy MDC VIC 3065
Telephone 613 9953 3000
Facsimile 613 9953 3005
www.acu.edu.au

CONSENT FORM- RECs FOCUS GROUPS
Copy for Participant

TITLE OF PROJECT: **Leading Professional Learning**

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Kath Engebretson

NAME OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: Mrs Elizabeth Dowling.....

I (the participant) have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research project as a participant in a focus group. I further agree to the audio taping of the focus group. I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time (without comment or penalty / without affecting my employment / relationship with the researcher). I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR: *K. Engebretson* **DATE:** 9/7/2011

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER *Elizabeth Dowling* **DATE:** 9/7/2011



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www.acu.edu.au

CONSENT FORM- REC/ FOCUS GROUPS
Copy for Researcher

TITLE OF PROJECT: **Leading Professional Learning**

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Kath Engebretson

NAME OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: Mrs Elizabeth Dowling.....

I (the participant) have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research project as a participant in a focus group. I further agree to the audio taping of the focus group. I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time (without comment or penalty / without affecting my employment / relationship with the researcher). I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR: *K. Engebretson* DATE: 9/7/2011

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER *E. Dowling* DATE: 9/7/2011

Appendix 3: Permission from the Director of the CEOM



Catholic Education Office
Archdiocese of Melbourne

In reply please quote:

GE11/0009
1697

20 April 2011

Mrs E Dowling
6 Patricia Street
EAST KEILOR VIC 3033

Dear Mrs Dowling

I am writing with regard to your research application received on 15 April 2011 concerning your forthcoming project titled *Leading Professional Learning*. You have asked approval to approach Catholic primary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, as you wish to survey teachers and religious education coordinators.

I am pleased to advise that your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the nine standard conditions outlined below.

1. The decision as to whether or not research can proceed in a school rests with the school's principal, so you will need to obtain approval directly from the principal of each school that you wish to involve.
2. You should provide each principal with an outline of your research proposal and indicate what will be asked of the school. A copy of this letter of approval, and a copy of notification of approval from the university's Ethics Committee, should also be provided.
3. A *Working with Children* (WWC) check – or registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) – is necessary for all researchers visiting schools. Appropriate documentation must be shown to the principal before starting the research in each school.
4. No student is to participate in the research study unless s/he is willing to do so and informed consent is given in writing by a parent/guardian.
5. You should provide the names of schools which agree to participate in the research project to the Knowledge Management Unit of this Office.
6. Any substantial modifications to the research proposal, or additional research involving use of the data collected, will require a further research approval submission to this Office.
7. Data relating to individuals or schools are to remain confidential.

1 of 2

8. Since participating schools have an interest in research findings, you should consider ways in which the results of the study could be made available for the benefit of the school communities.
9. At the conclusion of the study, a copy or summary of the research findings should be forwarded to this Office. It would be appreciated if you could submit your report in an **electronic format** using the email address provided below.

I wish you well with your research study. If you have any queries concerning this matter, please contact Mr Martin Smith of this Office.

The email address is <km@ceomelb.catholic.edu.au>.

Yours sincerely



Nancy Bicchieri
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

ACU Ethics Approval Form



Human Research Ethics Committee

Committee Approval Form

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Kath Engebretson Melbourne Campus

Co-Investigators: Melbourne Campus

Student Researcher: Elizabeth Dowling Melbourne Campus

Ethics approval has been granted for the following project:

Leading professional learning in religious education

for the period: 09/02/2011-25/09/2012

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Register Number: V2010 132

The following standard conditions as stipulated in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (2007) apply:

- (i) that Principal Investigators / Supervisors provide, on the form supplied by the Human Research Ethics Committee, annual reports on matters such as:
 - security of records
 - compliance with approved consent procedures and documentation
 - compliance with special conditions, and
- (ii) that researchers report to the HREC immediately any matter that might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol, such as:
 - proposed changes to the protocol
 - unforeseen circumstances or events
 - adverse effects on participants

The HREC will conduct an audit each year of all projects deemed to be of more than low risk. There will also be random audits of a sample of projects considered to be of negligible risk and low risk on all campuses each year.

Within one month of the conclusion of the project, researchers are required to complete a *Final Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer.

If the project continues for more than one year, researchers are required to complete an *Annual Progress Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer within one month of the anniversary date of the ethics approval.

Signed: Date:09.02.2011.....
(Research Services Officer, Melbourne Campus)

Appendix 4: Lime Survey

Online Research at ACU -

<https://apps.acu.edu.au/surveys/admin/admin.php?action=showprinta...>

This survey is part of my doctoral thesis titled Leading Professional Learning which aims to explore the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators.

I have documentation from the Catholic Education Office Melbourne and ACU indicating their approval to approach interested classroom teachers to seek their permission to participate in this study.

This anonymous electronic survey aims to elicit information from interested primary catholic classroom educators about their professional learning needs as religious educators and allows them to comment on these experiences in the primary religious education context. You are invited to give me about five minutes of your time. Please remember there are no correct or incorrect answers to the questions. I am only interested in your personal opinion. Your answers will be kept confidential.

There are 6 questions in this survey

main

1 [a1]How long have you been teaching Religious Education? (required)

Please choose only one of the following:

- ☐ less than one year
- ☐ 1 – 2 years
- ☐ 3 – 4 years
- ☐ 5 – 6 years
- ☐ 7 - 10 years
- ☐ more than 10 years

2 [a2]What year level do you currently teach? (required)

Please choose only one of the following:

- ☐ kindergarten/prep
- ☐ Year 1
- ☐ Year 2
- ☐ Year 3
- ☐ Year 4
- ☐ Year 5
- ☐ Year 6

3 [a3]What professional learning do you need to develop as a Religious Education teacher?

Please write your answer here:

How long have you been teaching Religious Education? (required)

- ☐ less than one year ☐ 3 – 4 years ☐ 7 - 10 years
☐ 1 – 2 years ☐ 5 – 6 years ☐ more than 10 years
-

What year level do you currently teach? (required)

- ☐ kindergarten/prep ☐ Year 2 ☐ Year 4
☐ Year 1 ☐ Year 3 ☐ Year 5
☐ Year 6
-

What professional learning do you need to develop as a Religious Education teacher?**What professional learning do you require to encourage student learning in Religious Education?****What methods of professional learning in Religious Education do you find most effective?**

Appendix 5: Interview Guide/Checklist

This checklist is designed to ensure that each unstructured interview will explore issues relating as closely as possible to the research interest.

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Title /Position of Interviewee:

Introduction- Thanks you, name, duration

- Describe the research,
 - a) Explain purpose of the study
 - b) Individuals and sources of data to be collected
 - c) What will be done with data to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee
 - d) How long interview will take
 - e) Opportunity for questions
- Interviewer review the consent form
- Turn on audio recording equipment to test

Icebreaker:

Guiding questions:

- Describe the responsibility of the REC is the leadership of professional learning for RE teachers
- Attitudes/ perceptions of role?
- Factors that assist the leadership role?
- Factors that impede the leadership role?
- Models you find to be effective

Probes:

- Clarify,
- Elaborate,
- Is this true for all schools?

Thank individual for cooperation and participation in interview