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Contents

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EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS: SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Abstract

Continuous and effective professional learning is vital for all engaged in religious education (RE) and more especially all religious educators who are focussed on high quality learning for their students. Whilst there has been increased interest both internationally and nationally about what comprises effective professional learning, this preliminary report presents initial findings generated from a range of participants in the primary context of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia. Drawing on data that was collected using the methodology of grounded theory this article focuses on phase one of this study to explore the following overarching question: "What models/approaches to professional learning are best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools?" The study pursued this question through a set of coordinated electronic survey investigations with classroom religious educators designed to offer images of what is possible in Catholic primary schools that takes learning improvement in RE seriously. The findings may be particularly useful for all key stakeholders concerned with the quality of RE who seek to implement and evaluate RE professional learning and thus continue to improve the quality of the subject in the Catholic primary school.

Introduction

For all those committed to focus on the core matters of teaching and learning in Religious Education, (hereafter termed RE), a contemporary understanding of effective professional learning has much to offer. Mounting voices in the Australian context recognise the need to support religious teachers' lifelong learning opportunities (Dowling, 2012; Harvey, 2009; Healy, 2011). Yet, a desire for effective professional learning is one thing to assert and another to enact. Stage One of this study has generated findings about the needs and issues associated with professional learning for religious educators in the Catholic primary setting. The content of this paper is presented in four broad sections. The first section provides a brief outline of the study. The second section succinctly explores the research design used to generate data regarding the perceptions of professional learning in RE. The third section describes and examines data generated by the initial online survey. The final section considers some of the implications of these preliminary findings for key stakeholders in RE.

The study

These initial findings outlined in this paper are part of a broader on-going study concerned with an exploration of the leadership role of the REC in the professional learning of religious educators in Catholic primary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese, Australia. The research issue at the centre of this project is the dissonance between theory of effective 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. Whilst this study has provided an expansive understanding of the needs and issues associated with leading RE professional learning in the primary context, this paper is limited to discussion about the initial findings of the context specific online lime survey instrument. This instrument was designed to collect data on the models and approaches to professional learning best suited to the needs of religious educators in Catholic primary schools. The points of view of the RE classroom teachers concerning their professional learning needs are examined as they are significant stakeholders in the pursuit of quality RE. Their perspectives are relevant to all who value and wish to support RE teachers in their ongoing efforts to improve student learning in RE.

The findings were gained by a method specific technique: an anonymous, short online open-ended Lime survey. Whilst some papers reporting on the conditions for professional learning have already appeared in earlier editions of this journal, the research reported in this paper differs in that it provides some perspectives on professional learning from those directly responsible or experiencing these opportunities, the RE classroom teachers. In fact it gave classroom teachers of RE significant voice in identifying the operative understandings of their professional learning needs. Further given that the participants completed the survey anonymously, the results provided both frank and realistic testimonies which offer both opportunity and challenge to RE stakeholders at multiple levels of Catholic schools as they seek to develop individual and system capacity building in RE. Consequently, the data that emerged from the anonymous electronic survey are of particular interest because they raised pertinent issues about professional learning from the vantage point of key stakeholders. These findings may assist individuals responsible for professional learning in RE to reflect on their schools current practices and develop a realistic action plan to support the professional growth of their RE staff.

Research design

The qualitative domain allowed the researcher to perceive meaning which people (classroom teachers of RE) have constructed from events and experiences with professional learning. Hence the epistemological framework of constructionism was adopted (Crotty, 2003). A qualitative approach was selected because the human and social basis of the study ensured it was an appropriate and effective means of exploring the research question. It provided a suitable means to seek a deeper understanding and to explore the nuances of experiences of professional learning in RE, to extract the degree of detail not available by quantification.

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was the foundation of the research methodology used to orchestrate the use of data gathering strategies. It provided a legitimate starting point for understanding and exploring the professional learning needed to develop as a RE teacher which emerged from the preliminary findings of numerous classroom teachers within schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. As the grounded theory approach drew on the professional learning experiences and perceptions of classroom religious educators, the study was enriched by data that focused on participants' lived experience and looked at the meaning people placed on the events, processes and structure in their lives. Grounded theory comprises a systematic, inductive and comparative approach to conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 1). Through this process categories emerged which were 'grounded' through the process by which they are generated and the main issues of the participants were discovered. Therefore it was pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in the lived experience of each participant's reality.

In the context of the broad study, it was the author's intention to come to know and better understand professional learning for religious educators in the primary Catholic context cognisant of the need to not force the data but rather allow the categories to emerge from the data (Glaser, 1998). Consequently, when engaging in grounded theory methodology, it was necessary to deliberately suspend preconceptions in order to be open to discovery and the emergence of theory. Grounded theory enabled the researcher to identify four key categories which were features of religious educators' professional learning needs.

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. 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, 2009; Silverman, 2005). They also provided a low threat means of obtaining relevant confirmation about a participant's past experience anonymously. The survey was designed for interested classroom teachers to solicit opinions on a number of professional learning issues as well as descriptive information on professional learning activities and initiatives. 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. As response rates in surveys are commonly low, after investigation, an electronic Lime survey was devised to maximise the rate of potential participants. This tool enabled an efficient way of collecting and managing large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time. A further benefit of the electronic lime survey was that it was easy and efficient to use and provided the facility for respondents to save and return to the survey at any time.

To guard against ambiguous and vague language the survey was piloted. This pretest survey improved consistency, uniformity and assisted to make the questions more clear, concise and unambiguous so as to elicit the greatest amount of information from participants (Creswell, 2009). 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 classroom teachers to participate in a short electronic survey and informed and invited interested classroom teacher of RE 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.

As a component of this study the survey 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 the surveys enabled cross referencing to other data collection strategies used later in this study.

Classroom Participants

A total of 123 interested 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 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. Whilst the survey response rate was pleasing, 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.

Whilst this is a qualitative study, given the high response, it is convenient here to present some tables in numerical form to illustrate the range of responses from participants. Table 1.1 presented below summarises the range of teaching experience of interested primary RE classroom teachers from the Melbourne Archdiocese who responded to the survey. It reveals that the participants had a range of experience in teaching RE although predominantly they had been teaching for over 10 years.

Table 1.1

Teaching experiences of interested primary classroom teachers from the Melbourne Archdiocese who responded to the survey.

How long have you been teaching RE?		
Answer	Count	Percentage
Less than one year	2	1.63
1-2 years	5	4.07
3-4 years	8	6.50
5-6 years	11	8.94
7-10 years	11	8.94
More than 10 years	86	69.92

Although the range of participants' experiences varied it was valuable to gain perspectives from an array of classroom RE educators with 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 next table, Table 1.2 demonstrates the range of respondents from each level of the school.

Table 1.2

Summary of participant at each year level from the Melbourne Archdiocese who responded to the survey.

Which year level do you teach RE?		
Answer	Count	Percentage
Prep	20	16
Year 1	11	9
Year 2	27	22
Year 3	16	13
Year 4	11	9
Year 5	8	7
Year 6	30	24

Table 1: 2 indicated there was a fairly even spread of respondents at each level of the school and it was possible to gain different perspectives from the junior, middle and senior RE classroom teachers thereby allowing a more complete view of RE educators needs at all levels of the primary school.

The next section provided insights into the "what" of RE professional learning and asked respondents to consider the professional learning they needed as religious educators. As might be expected 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 1.3 in decreasing order of frequency. After Table 1.3 the data generated is interpreted in more detail.

Table 1.3

Summary of emerging categories of professional learning needs of religious educators

Category	Sub Category	Junior	Middle	Senior	Total
1.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
2.Enhancing teacher content knowledge	Catholic doctrine, beliefs, practices, traditions	9	10	11	30
	Scripture	7	11	10	28
	Mass/Prayer	7	1	3	11
	Sacraments	4	2	1	7

3. Enhancing Curriculum Supports	Resourcing	2	4	5	11
	ICT	1	2	2	5
	Multi faith			2	2
4. Enhancing professional learning partnerships	Accreditation	3		3	6
	Masters		1	2	3
	Grad Dip/Post grad	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 field.

Category One: Enhancing teacher pedagogical knowledge

The most frequent response concerned the need for pedagogical knowledge and responses indicated that some RE teachers held high expectations with regard to their professional learning needs in this category. Whilst responses were varied, improving teacher pedagogical knowledge was often articulated in relation to a variety of contemporary teaching/learning strategies in RE. By and large respondents argued strongly 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". Whilst 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". 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 that progressive pedagogical thinking and standards can be applied to RE. These responses reinforced the contention forwarded in the RDECS: "it (Religious Instruction) should make use of the best educational methods available to schools today" (1988, # 70).

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 year's students in the Melbourne Archdiocese, namely, *The Good Shepherd Experience.* One participant (100) stated "I need to know/keep abreast with 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, particular to the Archdiocese of Melbourne was another common professional learning pedagogical need expressed by teachers in the early years.

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"* (PCK) (Hashweh, 2005; Shulman, 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" (Mc Caughtry, 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". This need alluded to an amalgamation of pedagogy and specific subject knowledge. This response suggested that, for this participant, RE was perceived with "the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge" (GDC, 1997, # 73). It must be noted that this argument was not universally held.

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". 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 way that the participants' knowledge of students influences decisions about the selection

of content. The selection of 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.

Summary of this category

Schools and teachers need to plan and teach a 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 would be expected with all other areas of the curriculum, the RE teacher is challenged to facilitate 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 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 2: Enhancing teacher content knowledge

The next most frequent response provided by classroom survey participants, although expressed differently, was categorised 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 *Coming to Know Worship and Love, A Religious Education Curriculum Framework for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne.* 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 sub categories validated the contention that RE has its own distinct and specific body of knowledge. Knowledge of this may be termed religious literacy.

Calls for greater levels of religious literacy of RE staff (Buchanan, 2009; 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 understanding of the content, 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 simply: "I can't teach what I can't explain". 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 facilitate RE it was made clear that 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 12: "I need a real depth of knowledge of the RE content which I can expand upon to teach RE more effectively in the classroom". These sentiments reflected an educational approach to RE espoused by numerous contemporary RE scholars (Rummery, 1977; Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; 1988; Moran, 2002) which emphasises 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 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". 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, those teachers not of a Catholic background/upbringing and those lacking formal RE training or qualifications. The importance of acquiring and applying content knowledge was explained by participant 109:

> Having just finished my Masters (degree) in religious education, it has made me realise 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!

Another key learning from these findings for those responsible for the quality of RE in Catholic primary schools was 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 primary Catholic schools.

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/extend their own content knowledge. This was encouraging.

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 religious education especially the use of Scripture is important - analysing it, letting the student get to know it. Knowing it yourself first". This and similar comments pointed to the understanding 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, 2002; Rymarz; 2012) which insists that 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.

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. Some serious allegations emerged. 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 Contemporary Teaching and Learning Mathematics (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:

> An opportunity for teachers in classrooms to have much more PD offered. 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.

This perceived lack of recognition by some by classroom practitioners of the need and importance of RE professional learning, was in stark contrast to official church documents and local Catholic SIPs which claim that RE staff in Catholic schools are encouraged to engage in professional learning, always seeking innovative ways to improve their practice. If continuing profession 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 begs the question "rhetoric or reality". 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 surprisingly 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 RE area." The following extract from participant 72 compounds this issue and 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 one point needs to be made, that is 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.

Summary of this category

These findings in this category clearly demonstrated that teachers of RE require professional competence in specific content areas. The findings affirmed 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. This data suggested that increased competencies in religious knowledge must continue to be a focus of professional learning for religious educators in order to improve teacher practice and potentially enhance student learning in RE. Whilst the findings in this category suggested subject matter knowledge was valued by participants, 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 the RE area, 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. The current climate of accountability, outcomes based education and formalised assessment demands that RE teachers have greater understanding of content, learning theories, and pedagogy to develop and support their classroom RE practice. Therefore, it may be best to view category one and two as complementary to each other.

Category 3: 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. A clear example of this need was articulated by a Year Three teacher, participant 94, who requested "knowledge of contemporary RE 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/mediums that would ultimately enhance their RE curriculum and teaching. In addition to the expressed need for curriculum supports was an added concern for time. This was illustrated 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". Another, 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".

Together with a concern for time to experiment and learn more about the curriculum supports, was a call 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". 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, 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 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. ICT was espoused as an important curriculum resource although some data indicated deficiencies and challenges which needed 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.

Category 4: Enhancing professional learning partnerships.

The next theme that emerged was the notion that professional learning in RE could develop and enhance professional partnerships with other stakeholders of RE. Respondents identified a variety of ways that professional learning could enhance their RE teaching and increase their professionalism. 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". 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 National Catholic Education Commission's (NCEC) Religious Education Accreditation Policy. They expressed the expectation "Teachers of religious education, as well as those leading Catholic schools require additional professional competence in scripture, theology, religious education and faith formation and a developed sense of confidence in their delivery" (NCEC, 2009, 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 are 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 scathing when they reflected on their professional learning partnerships at tertiary institutions and indicated that 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).*

Some other participants reiterated this viewpoint (10) "I attended a uni course and unfortunately it provided very little practical advice". Closer scrutiny of all new and existing tertiary units may ensure the 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. As Catholic classroom teachers are key stakeholders in the enterprise of RE, these multiple claims validate the need to seriously critique, review and strengthen accreditation arrangements and requirements. Ongoing collaboration with 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.

> 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. It is important to consult with classroom stakeholders and relevant Catholic education authorities across the state to ensure that all courses offered in RE meets classroom teachers expressed needs. 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, 2009). 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 2010; Healey, 2011). 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. 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.

Overall summary

It is imperative that RE professional learning be better understood in order that Catholic primary schools and school systems can ensure that they provide relevant and timely structures and supports to empower both individual classroom teachers and educational teams within the Catholic primary school. In turn, this builds the capacity of RE teachers to improve the RE curriculum and affect student learning in RE.

Based on a grounded theory approach, from an anonymous survey of over 123 participants four categories emerged from the data which provided valuable insights into the RE classroom teachers professional learning needs in the Catholic primary context.

They were:

(1)   Enhancing teacher pedagogical knowledge.

The pragmatic concerns of participants in this study were clearly evident in this category where teachers prized opportunities to investigate and explore effective practices of teachers which might improve student learning. Classroom teachers added the caveat that such opportunities include contemporary best practice which enabled teachers to respond to the specific needs of the students within their charge.

(2)   Enhancing teacher content knowledge

The next category highlighted the importance of strategic professional learning planning which is based on the knowledge of teachers' content needs. Without adequate and contemporary understandings of content RE teachers claimed they can be thwarted in their efforts to deliver quality RE. Further there was a not uncommon perception that professional learning endeavours in RE endeavours are not commensurate with other domains of learning.

(3)   Enhancing teacher curriculum supports

The third emerging category identified that again participants wanted contemporary, high quality and innovative RE resources to support their successful implementation of RE. They also indicated that this needs to be privileged by time to experiment and evaluate these supports. To the extent that these requests are met in all local schools requires further investigation.

(4)   Enhancing professional learning partnerships

Another point emerging from the data was a concern for further study in partnership with external providers like Universities or the central system which supports teachers in practical ways. This insight raised an issue that requires further consideration. To what extent is there ongoing collaboration with classroom teachers in the efforts to review and strengthen accreditation requirements and other professional partnerships with key RE stakeholders?

Summary

As part of an on-going study, the points of view of the RE classroom educators concerning their professional learning needs can help Catholic primary schools build viable and efficient pathways to support staff and student learning in RE. The findings expressed by a range of classroom teachers reiterated the need to have suitable trained and qualified teachers, supporting the intentions of RDE (CCE, 1988, par. 97) "Everything possible must be done to ensure that Catholic schools have adequately trained RE teachers; it is a vital necessity and a legitimate expectation".

The anonymous classroom teachers involved in this study suggested that professional learning in RE can support classroom teachers' teaching practice and help create the conditions that enable teachers and students to take an increased degree of responsibility for their own teaching and learning in RE. The insights raised here while pertinent to the contexts of the participants in this study have the potential to provide platforms for further exploration and discussion with different RE stakeholders within a school. The findings presented may be critiqued and challenged in local contexts to generate new, shared understandings and practices for improved professional learning for RE teachers a well as the shared goal for improved student learning in RE.

Conclusion

This paper has examined and articulated themes that dominate teachers' perceptions based on their experience of professional learning in religious education in a primary catholic school context. It has discussed some preliminary data and identified emergent themes which were used to sort and organise responses from the classroom teachers. It described four key areas identified by the classroom teachers as factors which

are important professional learning needs for religious educators. It has explored the implication of these categories. Consideration and recognition of these categories can support the professional learning of RE staff at every stage of their career.

Through an examination of the professional learning needs from a range of classroom teachers it is possible to become more fully aware of the possibilities and challenges of professional learning in primary schools today and perhaps to identify in a limited way what can be improved in the future. Understanding the needs and expectations of RE staff and fostering trusting and open relationships with them in facilitating professional learning, means that all stakeholders in RE can build their confidence in knowing how to promote professional learning, contribute to professional learning and respond to RE staff requests in professional learning. Effective RE professional learning must always be open to scrutiny and continuous review to ensure that professional learning opportunities provided do in fact build the confidence and skills of RE teachers and in turn build individual, team and system capability.

It is hoped that this ongoing research may continue to inform the development, implementation and evaluation of professional learning experiences for religious educators in Catholic primary schools.

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