

The Need for a School–Parish Approach to Religious Education

Lessons for a Religious Literacy Project

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Abstract

The development of children's literacy, particularly their religious literacy, requires effective learning communities in which schools develop welcoming, open and learning focused relationships with parishes.

This paper highlights the importance of assessment in Religious Education in the Catholic Tradition. School systems are accountable for reporting to the different stakeholders on students' learning and attainments in different curriculum areas. Assessment tools and reporting procedures need to be compatible with the domain and learning being assessed. Details of the Religious Literacy Assessment Project are provided as a basis for understanding the frameworks used for assessing student performances, analysing the data and formulating recommendations.

An analysis of religious literacy assessment data for Year 4 children over a six year period shows differences in learning outcomes between the children who do not have regular experiences of participating in a parish and those children who do have regular participation in the religious life of the parish. The data from the Religious Literacy Assessment project challenges parishes, schools and teacher education institutions to work together in facilitating the development of children's religious literacy, particularly for those children who have little or no experience of church on weekends.

The paper addresses how teacher education is being structured so that beginning teachers adopt a school-community-parish approach to religious education. This teacher education approach to the development of children's religious literacy gives priority to children experiencing significant satisfaction and enjoyment in a "hands on" approach to learning. The paper describes the role of the university in developing this learning community and reports upon the attitudes of student teachers to this approach to teacher education.

Keywords

Parish, School, Religious Education, Religious Literacy.

Introduction

According to the Congregation for the Clergy (1997), catechesis should be the responsibility of the entire Christian community. Continuing education in the faith is a question, which concerns the whole community. Catechesis, therefore, is an educational activity, which arises from the particular responsibility of every member of the community, in a rich context of relationships.

In *Fashion me a people: Curriculum in the church* (1989), Maria Harris explores the nature of the church as a people with a pastoral vocation. Harris writes that there is no Christian image that has so captured our imagination in recent years as the image of ourselves as a people with a pastoral vocation. Harris refers to the tensions that exist in those who have a pastoral vocation within the parish. These are the tensions between the personal and the communal, between the local and global, and between the clergy and the laity.

The whole life of a parish community should be crafted to nurture the faith of its people. Every function of its ministry should work towards the education in faith of the parish community. Traditionally, catechesis in the parish was seen as the parish's ministry of the word, however, Groome (2003, p. 22) writes that "we must bring a catechetical consciousness to all functions of ministry." The whole life of a parish is its faith curriculum, with everything about it making it a teaching and learning community.

At the heart of Catholicism, is evangelisation, which is a call and duty to share our faith received at baptism through word and action. This takes place over an individual's lifetime and finds expression within a Christian faith community, particularly within the family and parish. The family and

parish share the Church's mission of evangelisation, which is to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world so that humanity might be renewed and transformed. In the spirit of collaboration the family, parish and school work together in this mission of evangelisation.

Catholic schools and parishes have a special responsibility for those students who attend Catholic schools and are not active members of a parish. This shared responsibility of school, parish and family for catechesis and evangelisation calls for a look at how school-parish religious education experiences are structured. In most parishes there will be a person or a group organising the various parish ministries and making decisions about the programs that will be adopted and the processes that will be followed. These processes provide opportunities for school-parish collaboration in developing children's religious literacy.

There are key moments in the child's life in the primary school when parish and school work together to include and invite all families to become active participants in the life of the parish. These key moments are seen when families are invited to prepare their children with the support of the school and the parish to be fully initiated into the life of the church through the reception of the sacraments. It is during preparation for the sacraments that parents and children can be educated together in their faith. For many parents this is a time when they renew their connections to the church and to the sacraments.

Moran (2007) supports Ryan (2007) and Whenman (2004) in their view that education does not occur just in a school setting. Moran outlines the importance of education in the parish and the need for parish groups to work together in partnership reminding us that one of the most successful parish partnerships is the partnership between family, parish and school in supporting and developing parish based sacramental programs.

With a decline in attendance at Sunday Eucharist communities may question the significant financial and human investments made by the Catholic community in its schools. Similar questions were posed by the NSW and ACT Bishops in their Pastoral Letter, 'Catholic Schools at a Crossroads' (2007), which reflected on the future of Catholic schools and drew attention to the need for students to achieve high levels of 'Catholic religious literacy' and practice, and that Catholic schools are led and staffed by people who will contribute to the achieving of these goals. This presents an ongoing challenge for school communities to support the ongoing professional learning of those teachers who staff Catholic schools and a challenge for ACU in developing future teachers who are both religiously literate themselves and are experienced in developing the religious literacy of children.

Assessment, Religious Education and Religious Literacy

With the intention that Religious Education has similar esteem and credibility to other curriculum areas and to profile its central place in the total education experience of children, "assessment has been increasingly viewed as a valuable strategy in Religious Education for the purposes of accountability and enhancing student learning" (Sanber et al, 2008, p. 129).

Recent decades have witnessed significant change and developments in the field of assessment in education. Contemporary approaches to assessment of student achievement have been complemented by the increasing prominence of educational assessment as a policy issue. Above all, there has been increasing interest in approaches to assessment that promote, as well as measure, standards and quality which have implications for individual learners, schools and for school systems. Terms such as outcomes, assessment driven teaching, targets and benchmarking have become part of an agenda that have seen major shifts in planning, programming, teaching, assessment and evaluation in schools.

Many of these changes have come about from escalating calls for accountability from governments, from system authorities, from the media and from the public in general wanting to know whether student achievement benchmarks are being met. As a result, there is increasing attention given to assessment of student performance, and program evaluation.

In 2008, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) commenced in Australian schools. Each year, students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed on the same days using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. The National Assessment Program is the measure through which the government, educational authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes on a national platform.

Educators involved in Religious Education (RE) across Australia have not been immune from these trends and a number of Catholic diocesan school systems have implemented some form of system wide assessment of students. The 2007 Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of NSW and the ACT, suggested a "systematic external assessment of Catholic religious literacy" as one means of measuring the progress of Catholic schools.

Religious Education in Catholic schools in Australia is part of the core curriculum studied by all students and is based on programs developed at a diocesan level and has a specifically Catholic character.

In this sense, religious education in Catholic schools is

concerned with more than imparting knowledge about religion. It also serves as a medium of the enculturation of students into a Catholic understanding of life and the world, and inviting them into participation in the faith community.

Such a purpose suggests a broader horizon for assessment than mere knowledge and its application, towards competence and understanding about what it means to be Catholic, and how to participate in the heritage and life of the Catholic community. This is not to suggest any assessment instrument or procedure can or should measure whether a student 'has faith', a gift from God to be nurtured within the faith community. What can be measured, it is proposed, is the student's competence to engage with the faith community, its beliefs, traditions and practices.

Over the past decade there have been a number of assessment projects sponsored by different dioceses to raise the profile of Religious Education (RE) in Australia. As RE is not part of the prescribed program of study by the state government and is not assessed in the public domain, it has sometimes been treated as a subject without the necessary rigour of secular subjects.

Assessment has been seen by many educators in primary Religious Education as a means of giving credibility to RE worthy of the time allocation and resources given to the subject.

In the light of these factors, assessment has been increasingly viewed as a valuable strategy in Religious Education for the purposes of accountability and enhancing student learning.

Religious Literacy Assessment Project

Such an assessment initiative became the subject of The Religious Literacy Assessment Project (RLA), which was developed in collaboration between the Wollongong Catholic Education Office (WCEO) and Australian Catholic University (ACU) and is one element of a larger initiative, Partners in Learning.

This project did not develop in isolation but was informed by the conversation taking place between ACU, WCEO and the schools of the Wollongong diocese about the nature of literacy in general, and how literacy can best be fostered in schools.

When this project was initiated two major purposes of the Religious Literacy Assessment Project were:

- (i) to develop a practical assessment and reporting system at the diocesan level that would help in gathering information about the process of learning in Religious Education; and
- (ii) to profile student performance in Religious Education at the end of Stage 2 of primary school (i.e. Year 4).

This recommendation of the Religious Education Teachers for the placement of the assessment in Year 4 was important as it reflected the formative purpose of the diocese's

assessment and offered an opportunity to remedy gaps in learning while the students are still in primary school. The project was seen to be able to inform Religious Education teaching so that it could be more focused and thereby more effective. This formative purpose contrasts with summative assessment such as if the assessment occurred in Year 6, as is the case in other New South Wales dioceses. In the latter case the assessment would be reporting on the end performance of students who will soon transition out of their primary school into high school.

The Religious Literacy Assessment Project was embarked upon to address these purposes.

Religious Literacy

Religious literacy is the knowledge of, and ability to understand and focus upon the skills and capacities that are integral to a particular religion. In the case of Religious Literacy in the Catholic tradition this includes the shared experience of the participation of the people in the religious life of the Church.

Religious literacy has been defined as being "about understanding, participating and communicating. This understanding, participation and communicating is between members of the group, between the group and its texts, and between the group, the individuals and God. It encompasses knowledge, practices, strategies and skills for communicating within a Catholic community" (Butcher, English, Johnston, Sanber & Walsh, 2002, p. 7).

In their pastoral letter, *Catholic Schools at a Crossroads*, the Bishops of NSW and the ACT identified the systematic external assessment of Catholic religious literacy as one of a number of specific markers of progress towards the goals outlined in the letter (p.18).

According to *Catholic Schools at the Crossroads* (p.16) if Catholic schools are to succeed in passing on the Catholic faith to the next generation of Catholics there will need to be demonstrations of Catholic religious literacy through appropriate assessment tasks and supporting religious activities developed within the school and parish community.

In the Wollongong Diocese, the concept of 'religious literacy' as a framework for assessment in Religious Education was first developed from conversations between teachers and CEO personnel with the ACU team. These conversations identified that being religiously literate requires children leaving a Catholic primary school to be able to communicate with and be at home in the Catholic community and religion in general.

"Religious Literacy" is about understanding, participating and communicating between the group and its texts, and between the group, the individuals and God. It encompasses knowledge, practices, strategies and skills for communicating within a Catholic community" (Butcher, English, Johnston, Sanber, Walsh 2002. p. 7)

For the past seven years the Religious Literacy Assessment has been administered in the Wollongong diocese and has been developed to include three types of learning outcomes with respect to religious literacy in the Catholic tradition linking to the RE curriculum in the Wollongong diocese. These outcomes look specifically at knowing the tradition, working with the tradition and applying the tradition.

To reflect the role of Religious Education with respect to religious literacy in the Catholic tradition the research team developed a second set of classifications for religious literacy outcomes. These are:

- Knowing the tradition - knowledge and understanding outcomes
- Working with tradition – reasoning skills
- Applying the tradition – practical and social skills
- Valuing the tradition – attitudes and values.

These four domains provided a basis for addressing the range of student outcomes associated with religious education.

To report upon the level of achievement of these outcomes by students, three descriptors were adopted. The levels of attainment are:

- Developing: in which student performance is largely within the outcomes for knowing the tradition and their responses are likely to suggest areas of knowledge and understanding that need more attention in the future.
- Achieving: in which student performance occurs largely across the outcomes for knowing and working with the tradition.
- Extending: in which student performance occurs across the outcomes for knowing, working with and applying the tradition.

This assessment framework is simple in structure, informative and commonly used in reporting literacy standards in schools and is therefore familiar to teachers, students and parents.

In this Religious Literacy approach to assessment in Religious Education the instruments for assessing religious literacy were designed to be in two parts. The first part, Part A, consisting of multiple choice, matching and short answer questions while the second part, Part B, includes an extended task for which students can choose their own ways and modes of responding to the major question or task. Part B is designed to allow students to be able to work in a creative mode in their own interest area and includes clear descriptors of outcomes to meet the planned task. Part B has the potential to particularly support the religious literacy outcome of *Valuing the Tradition*. Over the past seven years Part B has continued to be developed and refined to explore more effective ways of showcasing and celebrating the students' achievement and learnings, to drive support for learning and teaching in the RE classroom and to influence integration across a range of key learning areas.

Religious Literacy Assessment Data and Church Attendance

In the six years in which the RLA tool has been administered, there have been statistically significant differences in the religious literacy scores of students attending Church most weekends, and those who do not attend. Results clearly indicate that Church attendance is positively correlated with higher religious literacy scores.

The difference in the two sets of scores is indicated in the latest assessment below (Table 1). Trends are consistent with results from previous assessment periods (Butcher, 2011, p. 24).

Table 1: Comparison of 2010 Religious Literacy scores, based on weekend Church attendance.

	N	Median	Mean	SD	Highest	Developing	Achieving	Extending
Part A								
Yes	456	72.73	71.28	11.75	94.95	8.30	64.70	27.00
No	823	67.68	65.68	13.02	92.93	19.00	66.60	14.50
Part B								
Yes	453	70.00	71.21	16.53	100.00	7.30	57.80	34.90
No	820	66.67	67.26	16.32	100.00	9.40	66.70	23.90
Overall								
Yes	453	71.06	71.27	12.30	96.97	8.60	61.60	29.80
No	820	67.17	66.47	12.63	94.95	15.40	68.30	16.30

Chart Legend

- Demarcation line between each band
- D** Developing
- A** Achieving
- E** Extending
- Yes
- - - No

In comparing results across Part A, B and overall literacy scores, students who attended Church most weekends attained higher mean and median scores and were more represented in the 'extending' level in Part A, Part B and the overall Religious Literacy Score, compared with those who did not attend most weekends. Differences are quite marked, with almost a third of Churchgoers reaching the 'extending' level in Part A, B and overall, compared to less than a fifth of non Churchgoers for Part B and overall scores. In Part A, students attending Church most weekends scored higher than those not regularly attending on 29 of the 30 items.

Given the clear differences between the two groups, it is worth noting that the number of students not attending Church most weekends (the 'No' group) almost doubles that of the attending ('Yes') group.

The RLA data and analyses have informed the recommendations to WCEO, the Diocese and the schools. These recommendations suggested that the Religious Literacy Project Team continue to work with schools on the analysis of their school data including the recommendation to support an attempt to develop a parish – school approaches to religious literacy.

This recommendation was based upon the data presented above and is the focus for the school and parish community engagement approach to Religious Education in Australian Catholic University as presented below.

Promoting religious literacy through school and parish community engagement

As active members of a faith community it is expected that students are supported not only by their own families but also by the wider faith community to which they belong. By their very nature the school and parish need to work together to promote religious literacy of both the children and the young adults who are the future of the church.

For pre service teachers from an Australian Catholic University in their fourth year of the Primary Bachelor of Education Course the RLA data and analysis suggested a number of recommendations to the WCEO. The final recommendation was to look at ways to promote parish – school approaches to religious literacy..

As celebrating the sacraments is an important part of parish life and as the sacraments lie at the heart of a Catholic faith community this was seen to be a good opportunity for pre service teachers to develop an understanding of ways in which schools and school communities work together. Malone (1999) examines the complexities and challenges of sacramental programs within the realities of the contemporary catholic community in the Australian context and writes that teachers and catechists must all work with children to prepare them to celebrate the sacraments thus encouraging our young people to become actively involved participants in the sacramental life of the Church.

This raises the question of how can such a school-parish approach to religious literacy be structured into pre-service and continuing teacher education? The focus in the next section is on implementing this approach in the pre-service education of Religious Education teachers. This university, school, and parish approach to Religious Education was structured to address the unintentional but real outcomes of teacher education which gave priority to the school being a separate, rather than an engaged, agent for religious education. For our University students this was an attempt to raise an awareness of the role of the school and the parish to work together in the ongoing support of primary students and to be actively engaged in an enquiry process as part of the parish based sacramental programs.

Pre service teacher education and school – parish community engagement – a new way forward

At the conclusion of the 2010 RLA test it was decided to give priority to focussing upon the resources and approaches used in teaching the sacraments to ensure:

- students' adequate knowledge of these areas of the religious tradition; and
- development of the resources and approaches was done in the context of student teacher engagement with both parish and school.

Through this approach it was intended that students enrolled in studying primary Religious Education, would engage in assessment tasks, which would both provide a school-community approach to religious education and alert Religious Education students to the ministry of teaching within a parish.

In 2011 students enrolled in Religious Education at the Australian Catholic University, were required to focus part of their assessment for the semester on linking with a parish of their choice, preferably their own parish to discover what program is being used to prepare children to receive the sacraments. Students were also asked to design and develop a resource to support one of the parish based sacraments, the sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist or Confirmation.

This approach to Assessment focused on pre service teachers enrolled in the final year of the Bachelor of Education primary and the Bachelor of Early Childhood and linked student assessment with the school, the parish and parish based sacramental programs.

The task included a plan in consultation with the Lecturer in Charge of the Course, consultation with a Catholic primary school in one of the Sydney or Wollongong dioceses, the design and make of the resource and the trialling and evaluation of the use of the resource accompanied by an evaluation from a cooperating teacher.

Students were required to engage with a Catholic primary school and organise a meeting time with the Religious Coordinator or Religious Education teacher of the school and a member of the Sacramental team of the parish. Students were asked to develop the plan in collaboration with the University, with a designated school and the parish associated with the nominated school. The aim was to gain an awareness of the program that was being used, the professional development given to facilitators of the program, the resources used and how those students involved in the program would be further supported by the parish in the years after receiving the sacrament.

Evaluation of the teacher education project

The students' completed projects offered a variety of resources, which reflected their creativity and areas of interest. Resources included websites, learning objects, drama boxes, reflective prayers, posters, picture books and story boxes, with hands on materials linked to the principles of Godly Play which support the telling of scripture stories used successfully in many dioceses of New South Wales. The resource also included a teacher and student manual of how the resource could be best used to support the nominated parish based sacramental program.

A number of students also initiated meetings with the parish priest, which resulted in a focused, collaborative approach to the planning of the resource. One priest, interviewed as part of the process, suggested ways in which the resource could best be used to support the parish sacramental program and further invited the students to assist with the delivery of the program.

One student who had completed a practicum experience on a Year 2 class in 2010 commented on the lack of good resources to support the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This resulted in the creation of a picture book with original story and illustrations published to support the sacrament. The student also developed a Smart Board resource using questioning from Blooms Taxonomy. Another student developed a game for Reconciliation based on the television program *Survivor*. The game included a number of challenges aimed at entertaining the students but also revising concepts that had been taught.

Moran (2007) expresses the view that education does not occur just in a school setting outlining the importance of parish education and the need for parish groups to work together in partnership reminding us that one of the most successful parish partnerships is the partnership between family, parish and school in supporting and developing parish based sacramental programs.

The role of the parish priest is also vital in school and parish community working together. (Malone, 1999). If school leadership teams and pastors develop mutual respect for each other's role, communicate frequently and have an understanding of the needs of one another, both the parish

and the school would be better able to develop an interactive professional working relationship..

It is hoped that these pre service teachers will make valuable connections with schools and address the question of how to maximise the benefits for students and teachers of incorporating the principles of storytelling, Godly play and other creative approaches such as drama, currently used successfully in the classrooms of the Wollongong diocese. This includes moving to a more inclusive language focus and giving priority to a school-parish approach to Religious Education, which gives priority to structuring relevance and connectedness for the students in parish as well as school.

Conclusion: Hope for the Future

This paper, drawing upon data from the Religious Literacy Assessment Project, has highlighted the need to support the religious literacy development of students, who have had little experience of Church on weekends, through a focus upon their being engaged learners in a school-parish approach to religious education. Ways in which teacher education can enhance the development of future teachers who engage with both school and parish in children's religious education have been documented. This included giving attention to how we might invite parents to become more active participants in the life of the parish and the children's religious education.

Assessment of religious literacy provides evidence upon which teacher practice may be enhanced and the learning outcomes of students improved. The RLA data showed the need to be responsive to the Church's call for the whole parish community to be involved in the religious education and faith development of children.

This call is also found in the Pastoral Letter of the NSW and ACT Bishops, when they state:

... we look to those involved in our schools to ensure that their very significant resources achieve, as far as possible, what the Catholic community rightly expects: young men and women of character and faith whose individual gifts are nurtured to their highest potential. (p. 20)

The student teachers in their final year at ACU appreciated the opportunity to engage across school and parish in their approach to religious education. Their evaluations suggest that they gained new insights in the work of the parish. They expressed satisfaction in the opportunity to develop resources that will be used to support the sacraments in both the school and the parish. Further research is needed to see if the engagement and interest of the students will continue into their work as Religious Education teachers in schools or whether it was just another assignment to be submitted as they approach their final months at University.

For some students it has been an opportunity to make contact with a parish for the first time, while for others already engaged in the life of the parish, this assignment has given them the confidence to volunteer to work as facilitators in the parish based sacramental programs in the coming months. This assignment is to be repeated with some modifications in a similar mode in Semester 2, 2011. It has been decided that the inclusion of a reflection journal, in Semester 2 might give further insight into the links between engagement with parish and school and their role as the next generation of teachers. It will also provide insights into the type of strategies we model with student teachers to ensure that our students may grow to be more active participants in the Catholic tradition.

Notes on contributors

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Professor Jude Butcher CFC AM is Director, Institute for Advancing Community Engagement and Professor of Community Engagement at Australian Catholic University. Previously he has been Head of School of Education and Head of Department of Education at the University and its predecessor colleges for more than 30 years. Jude is a member of the Wollongong Catholic Schools Council, the Edmund Rice Education Australia Board and Chair, Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education. He has been a member of the Board of Directors, Mater Dei School Camden, and chair of their Education Committee. His special research interests are in the areas of religious literacy, community engagement and higher education; educational capacity development; and transformational partnerships.

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