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What is the best and most special about teaching Religious Education?

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Abstract

If you have taught Religious Education in a Catholic secondary school, then you may have sat down at the end of the class or the school day and just wondered why you bothered. Before reading this article further, give yourself a few moments to reflect on this question:

“What for you is the best and most special about teaching Religious Education?”

How did you answer the question? Was your response negative or positive? Did you reach for the instant cynical remark, “When I finished teaching the class!” Or, did you imagine yourself taking great pride in accomplishing deeper understandings among your students? Maybe your response was one of mixed feelings. These responses are important because the disposition of a teacher towards his or her RE teaching is a key factor in the quality of Religious Education provided to secondary students in Catholic schools. This article outlines the findings of the second phase of a study about the teaching experiences of recently assigned RE teachers and the resultant changes in their outlook about RE teaching.

What is the best and most special about teaching Religious Education?

Introduction

The focus of this article is on recently assigned Religious Education (RARE) teachers in Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia. These are RE teachers who have begun teaching Catholic Religious Education with limited experience and training in this specific learning area. In Western Australia, RARE teachers are required to implement the Archdiocese of Perth RE Units of Work mandated by the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia. This article is a report on the second phase to the research on this group of teachers.

The Research

The purpose of the research was to explore the perceptions of RARE teachers about the implementation of RE Units of Work. An earlier article in the *Journal of Religious Education* reported on a survey of these teachers conducted during the late nineteen nineties as the first phase of this research (Hackett, 2008). The survey focused on three aspects of curriculum implementation described by Fullan (2007): changes to instructional resources, modifications to teaching approach and changes to beliefs about RE teaching. The survey indicated that there were a number of changes made by RARE teachers as a result of their experiences in teaching the RE Units which related to these three aspects. Two key findings emerged which suggested that teaching experience and ongoing formation were required for successful curriculum implementation among RARE teachers. There appeared to be evidence to suggest that teachers not only changed how they taught RE as they became familiar with the curriculum materials but also began to reassess the ideas about the way RE should be taught. Responses from the survey indicated that complex and personal concerns could have a significant bearing on the perceptions of the changes RARE teachers experienced, personally and professionally, in teaching the Units. To understand why such changes occurred and whether these changes were ongoing, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of phase two of the research.

Second Phase: Literature Review

Interviewing teachers about their perceptions of the first years of teaching RE is not new. Engebretson (1997) reported using this approach in her research of novice RE teachers and their experiences of teaching Religious Education. She described how these teachers envisioned teaching RE and provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their subsequent experiences of teaching in this learning area. Engebretson (1997, p. 18) concluded that unless novice RE teachers developed a coherent understanding of the pedagogical and theological aims of RE, then the experience of teaching RE would be disheartening. Likewise, this article on the second phase of the research reports on whether recently assigned RE teachers in WA had similar experiences to those outlined in Engebretson's study and if the teachers changed their beliefs about the purposes of RE teaching. Buchanan and Hyde (2006) have observed that there is limited published research on the role of the RE teacher and it is hoped that this article will add further to the body of knowledge about them and especially about teachers new to teaching Religious Education.

Second Phase: Methodology

An interview approach was used to explore in greater depth the teachers' perceptions of the changes they experienced and their reasons and feelings for why they responded in particular ways (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 268). From the survey of 122 RARE teachers, 28 teachers were interviewed twice over two school years about their perceptions of teaching these RE Units. For confidentiality reasons, pseudonyms are used in reporting findings. The teachers were purposively sampled based on responses to use of curriculum materials, teaching approach and perceived changes in teacher beliefs about Religious Education. This form of sampling was the means by which "researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of the typicality. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 89). Purposive sampling was used as a means of selecting a sample group that reflected the range and diversity of feelings about the main survey areas. The sample group of RARE teachers was indicative of the range of teachers who responded to the survey. The sample consisted of subgroups of teachers who reflected highly positive, typical or critical perceptions in the three aspects – use of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying principles (Fullan, 2007). The number of participants that were interviewed was drawn from each of the subgroups. Table One outlines the key characteristics of the 28 interviewees.

Table One Background to the Interview Participants

Participant Pseudonyms	Age Range (Years)	Main Teaching Area	Accreditation		RE Teaching Experience
			Study	Inservice	
Amber	21-25	English	✓	✓	2 nd year
Anne	51-55	T & E	✓	✓	2 nd year
Barbara	21-25	LOTE	✓	✓	3 rd year
Brian	26-30	Arts	✓	✓	4 th year
Charles	36-40	Arts	IP	×	2 nd year
Clare	21-25	T & E	✓	✓	2 nd year
Darla	46-50	English	✓	✓	4 th year
Diana	26-30	English	✓	✓	2 nd year
Edith	26-30	English	✓	✓	6 th year
Edward	21-25	SOSE	IP	✓	3 rd year
Pat	26-30	English	✓	×	2 nd year
Fran	41-45	Science	IP	IP	3 rd year
Frank	21-25	Science	IP	×	5 th year
Gayle	41-45	T & E	✓	✓	5 th year
Gwen	46-50	English	IP	IP	6 th year
Hailey	26-30	Science	IP	✓	4 th year
Ian	31-35	Arts	IP	✓	4 th year

Jessica	46-50	English	✓	✓	2 nd year
Kate	21-25	SOSE	✓	×	2 nd year
Mark	36-40	Science	IP	✓	2 nd year
Nancy	26-30	English	✓	✓	4 th year
Olivia	31-35	T & E	✓	✓	3 rd year
Pippa	21-25	Science	IP	✓	3 rd year
Rose	21-25	RE	✓	✓	3 rd year
Steven	41-45	T & E	×	IP	3 rd year
Tim	26-30	English	✓	✓	4 th year
Ursula	21-25	LOTE	✓	✓	5 th year
Victor	21-25	H & PE	IP	✓	2 nd year

Note:

Involvement:

Did not participate in
Second Round of
Interviews



Learning Areas (abbreviations):

- H & PE = Health & Physical Education
- LOTE = Language other than English
- SOSE = Studies of Society & Environment
- RE = Religious Education
- T & E = Technology & Enterprise

Accreditation status:

- ✓ = completed
- IP = in progress
- ×

× = not begun

RE Teaching

Experience:

Only teachers with more than one year and less than six years responded to the survey.

Semi-structured interviews offered greater benefits to the research than what could be achieved by another survey or approach (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, p.269). Through the interview, participants were able to reflect on and discuss their perceptions about implementing the RE Units in greater depth. They had more time (than in the case of the survey) to consider their perceptions and feelings towards their RE teaching. This reflection and discussion became a significant means by which to understand the rationale of the recently assigned teachers for managing the implementation process. In this sense, interviews allowed the possibility for unexpected responses to emerge (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, p.268).

Interview Findings

The first round of interviews reaffirmed the key factors to emerge from the survey: *experience* and *familiarity* in teaching the RE Units of Work. It was these two factors that recently assigned RE teachers believed helped them to meet one of the key demands of RE teaching (Buchanan, 2006, p. 20). While an understanding of the principles underpinning the Units was appreciated, the teachers described their own 'code of practice' and rationale for teaching RE as a part of their faith witness as being key factors. Ivers (2004) saw such an approach as an attempt by teachers to enact their understanding of implementing the RE Units of Work. What emerged from the first interviews was an expectation that the demands of teaching RE were going to change for them; many hoped that it was for the better. Such an expectation was a major factor in the implementation process of the Units. The purpose of the second round of interviews was to find out what changes had occurred in their perceptions of the demands of teaching RE and to examine more closely the interplay between the teaching of classroom RE and their personal and professional formation. Of significant importance, were the responses of teachers to the question: *What is best and most special about teaching RE for you?*

A repeated theme over the course of the interviews was the conviction that to teach RE, one had to be an authentic person of faith and a mentor to students. During the first round of interviews, RARE teachers were keen to teach RE and optimistically viewed the personal and professional challenges placed upon them by the RE Units of Work. Some recently assigned RE teachers had undertaken tertiary studies in Theology and Religious Education to fulfil *Accreditation to Teach RE* during their pre-service training. However, it would be misleading to assume that Accreditation, a mandatory professional requirement to teach RE in Catholic schools in Western Australia, was a guarantee of a deeper commitment to this learning area. While it may be the case that some recently assigned RE teachers were prepared to teach RE as a “filler” (Rymarz, 1999, p. 51), the personal and professional demands of the overall curriculum seemed to have had an impact on whether they continued to teach RE in the future.

Apart from their personal reasons for teaching RE, RARE teachers were faced with a question of professional priorities in order to survive their first years of teaching. To illustrate this point, the experience of one interviewee is recounted. Victor taught in a remote Catholic secondary school. A recent graduate, he was employed as a Physical Education teacher with one RE class to make up his teaching load. Victor was candid about where his priorities lie:

It's not your priority, my main teaching area is Phys. Ed. and that's where everyone sees you, see yourself, and that's where you dedicate most of your energies too. But it's nice to have that one RE class, I think it's important to have a variety of teaching areas for your own motivation yourself. And it's good to teach RE just for your own faith.

Like many RARE teachers, Victor was faced with developing his professional competence in his specialist learning area. Teaching RE was a part of his minor teaching load. Why would he want to demonstrate a deeper commitment to teaching RE when he had more than enough to handle with his specialist learning area? While Victor placed his energies into ‘Phys. Ed.’, he acknowledged that RE was good to teach “just for your faith”. He also made the point of how valuable he found the professional development inservice courses in RE that the school provided (mostly over the weekend):

I think ongoing professional development is important. ... doing Accreditation [to teach RE] and doing [inservices on] a new [RE] Unit every couple of months over the last two years has really kept me on track. And then I've developed from there.

It was possible that, if recently assigned RE teachers were naïve enough to think they could teach RE and not be affected by its expectations, they were mistaken. Victor, for instance, seemed to be affected both personally and professionally as he taught the subject and appreciated receiving further training. Some of the RARE teachers interviewed seemed to arrive at a significant juncture in teaching RE after a few years. They began to realise that in order to continue to teach RE, they needed to form a deeper personal commitment towards teaching Religious Education. Such a realisation or ‘passion’ for the subject was a crucial part of their personal and professional formation. This passion was framed often in terms of a calling or vocation (Palmer, 1998, pp. 170-171). However, some of the interviewees felt so strongly about the division in their integrity between their fundamental aspirations as a

teacher and their own assimilation of Catholic beliefs and practices that they stopped teaching RE altogether.

From the interviews, it became clear that recently assigned RE teachers sought to make their 'mark' on how to teach RE. Most were eager and passionate about teaching RE when they started. They hoped that within a short period, they would accrue enough classroom RE teaching experience and familiarity with the RE Units to feel competent in teaching RE. They were indeed hopeful and optimistic in the beginning! However, by the end of the second round of interviews – a period of almost two years – their perceptions of teaching RE changed. They were less enthusiastic and more aware of the increasing demands that teaching this learning area had upon them personally and professionally. For example, when Pippa, a young Science teacher who had not completed the study component of accreditation (see Table One), was faced with a new class, her prior experience seemed to be of no avail:

I'm feeling this year that I'm being quite influenced by the negativity of some of the students. Which is kind of making me think, why am I doing this?

Yes, they're Year 11 and they're just, you know, more concerned about TEE. I mean they just don't want to do it. So they're just being negative about everything I give them.

The feelings of exasperation were deep. No matter what she did for her class, she felt the students were not appreciative of her efforts and did not value what she presented to them. Some teachers felt like they were 'hitting themselves against a brick wall' at times to engage students in their learning.

Perhaps their experiences of teaching the RE units broadened the outlook of RARE teachers as to the demands of 'what' and 'how' to teach Religious Education. Certainly, they needed to know the content of the Units and how to teach this content using the strategies suggested in the teaching and learning program. However, as the interviewees reflected on their experiences since the first round of interviews, it became apparent to them that the 'what' and 'how' of teaching RE needed to be understood in terms of 'why' they personally were teaching Religious Education.

The teachers saw themselves as trying to engage students in matters of faith or spirituality. This attempt to engage students was seen as one of the best things about teaching Religious Education – perhaps one of those precious moments of evangelisation as contended by the Congregation for the Clergy (1997, para. 49). For Nancy, it was the opportunity for the teacher to help students find a Christian sense of identity and meaning in their lives:

those are the best moments when I've got kids working in groups and I can get around and talk to them, one on one or one to three. And that's when they'll ask me more intimate questions and really talk to me about the things that are weighing on their minds rather than in the context of the class discussion....

To have someone who wants to talk to them about the faith, loves the faith and doesn't mind being with kids, talking to them and engaging critically with what they're presenting....

For teachers like Nancy, it was not the explicit aspects of teaching RE that were valued but rather the more intimate ones, where matters close to the heart were discussed. Heil and Ziebertz (2004, p. 219) refer to this interaction as “correlation...a key competence for religious education teachers” where the teacher attempts to link the students’ views with the Christian one. By engaging some of the students in meaningful conversations about the Christian faith while having the rest of the class working purposefully also affirmed the sense of identity and purpose of the interviewee as a competent RE teacher.

The teachers saw their RE teaching as an extension of their calling or vocation. They recognised that teaching RE could be challenging and exhausting. However, teachers were optimistic about the value and reward of classroom RE teaching because they believed they were seen by their students to be significant mentors or role models and even as strong Christian witnesses. As Rose related, teaching RE was her way of following the will of God:

because I can get to know them beyond what can be done in other subjects, like I can support them, share part of my own Christian witness. They have someone the students can talk to about their issues and concerns.

... I feel called by God, in Year 10 I wanted to be an RE teacher, have this vocation. Had thought it might be a religious calling but no, as a [lay] teacher to ‘spread the Word’, ‘prayer’, ‘justice’, ‘relationships’, ‘getting to know God’. At the age of 18 being in a theology class, with seminarians, like something keeps me there. God just tells me to do this, have a constant dialogue with [God] to work this out. I let God speak through me, especially when praying.

For this teacher, teaching RE was an integral part of putting her faith into action, being able to serve God by witnessing her faith to students and teaching them something of what it meant to live a Christian life. An important component of sustaining the motivation to teach RE seemed to depend upon the depth and integrity of her personal faith formation.

In the second round of interviews, tensions emerged within recently assigned RE teachers about how and why they taught Religious Education. Many still felt a great sense of optimism, while others felt a sense of discouragement; and, for a few, a great sense of relief that they were not teaching RE anymore. What was apparent was that recently assigned RE teachers were coming to terms not only with the curriculum demands of the RE Units but also with their own personal and professional formation. They seemed to be facing personal dilemmas about their authenticity as persons and challenges to their integrity about the level of faith witness in their role as an RE teacher. Whereas in their main learning area they remained objective about the philosophy of teaching their academic subject, RE teaching demanded a personal faith commitment. Teachers found that they needed to reflect upon whether they were formed sufficiently to provide such a commitment on an ongoing, permanent, and genuine basis.

From the second round of interviews it appeared that recently assigned RE teachers did reach a point of decision that helped them to clarify their commitment to teaching Religious Education. For some teachers, the personal cost was too high and they decided to discontinue teaching RE classes. For most recently assigned RE teachers, the experience of implementing the RE Units had led them towards developing a deeper appreciation of their vocation as RE teachers. This deepening appreciation seemed to be an important aspect of

the formation of RARE teachers. For some recently assigned RE teachers, although they did not realise it, it was possible they were influenced personally, professionally and spiritually by the demands of teaching Religious Education.

Discussion

There appeared to be two groups of RARE teachers emerging from the interviews: the majority who were relatively positive about their RE teaching, the 'optimists', and a minority group who could be termed, the 'discouraged'. The 'optimists' saw their RE teaching as a means of actualising their desire to establish themselves as a competent RE teacher. They expressed the desire:

- for assurance (confidence, certainty, control) as they furthered their experience of teaching Religious Education;
- to be a 'faith and life' mentor that was to model to and advise the students;
- to develop and maintain a pastoral rapport with students;
- for collegial exchange on a formal and informal basis; and,
- to be passionate about teaching RE as part of their vocation or calling to teach in a Catholic school.

In contrast, the 'discouraged' saw their RE teaching as one where these desires had become frustrated or unable to be actualised due to:

- a loss of confidence because of inexperience or insufficient training;
- a lack of faith formation because of insufficient knowledge or overly stringent expectation of faith commitment;
- an inability to develop rapport because of expressed negativity or apathy of the students to the teaching and learning;
- feelings of isolation and expectations to conform to a rigid teaching and learning program; and,
- exhaustion by continually facing challenges from students related to teaching and learning and from questioning of the personal faith stance of the teacher.

The RARE teachers who possessed and sustained an optimistic view about their RE teaching tended to continue their involvement in Religious Education. They believed they were making a significant contribution to the religious and spiritual formation of their students. This belief inspired them to 'do more' and to 'be more' for their students. Treston (1997, p. 69) draws upon the work of Erikson and uses the word "generativity" to describe the energy teachers applied to teaching their students. This generativity was the energy that came from within the teacher to fulfil their aspirations of becoming a competent RE teacher. When teachers became discouraged, their loss of generativity was evident in feelings of being drained and wanting to withdraw from teaching Religious Education.

These findings were significant because they came from the personal experiences of recently assigned RE teachers. Their perceptions were grounded in a tension between their personal quest for becoming competent RE classroom teachers and the frustrations of not fulfilling such a quest. The data exemplified an important relationship between implementing a curriculum and the need for teacher formation; one that strongly resonated with the work of Palmer (2004) in the professional and spiritual formation of teachers.

It was apparent from the interviews that the recently assigned RE teachers were on the cusp of deciding to continue to teach RE or not to teach the subject. Interviewees felt that RE teachers needed to make a choice as to whether they continued to teach the subject, especially if they felt they did not agree with the content. The interviewees' feelings towards the subject were largely the result of their RE teaching experiences and its impact on their personal authenticity and spiritual integrity. RARE teachers like Edward, felt very deeply about the importance of the faith witness of the recently assigned teacher:

Most special thing for me is that it's a way that I can... well I'm trying to follow the Lord in my life. And then there's one way I can do that and that's teaching RE. Because I'm not off helping the poor in Africa... .

The statement, "follow the Lord in my life" by Edward, heralds the sentiments of the advice of the Congregation of Catholic Education (1982) about the importance of developing Religious Educators with appropriate religious and professional formation (para. 65). Engebretson (1992, p. 19) also found similar motivations initially among her study group of novice RE teachers. Authenticity was linked here with the willingness of the teacher to share their own personal story with the students about faith. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1988, para. 96) emphasised that:

A teacher who has a clear vision of the Christian milieu and lives in accord with it will be able to help [students] develop a similar vision, and give them the inspiration they need to put it into practice.

In this statement, the Congregation for Catholic Education has recognised this important personal integration of authentically human and spiritual qualities. The capacity to share aspects of their personal humanity and its impact on students should not be underestimated (Rymarz, 2001, p. 24). Interviewees discussed this faith witness as crucial to how they presented themselves authentically to their students. For example, Ursula wanted the students to respect her as a person of faith. She felt that this perception by the students was significant. Ursula believed she was a model of a "person living out Gospel values" who encouraged the students to do likewise. To give of themselves in this way meant the teachers also needed to become something more themselves.

The faith commitment of the teacher was an important factor for RARE teachers. Recently assigned RE teachers, like Ursula, believed that the authenticity of their faith influenced their students, even if the students did not agree with what the teachers believed. The impression left on the students was not only the actions of "living out Gospel values" but also how Ursula recounted her own personal experiences of faith. Authenticity here was linked to personal experience. Ursula had experienced the love and mercy of God and she wanted to share this personal faith experience with others too. Similarly, teachers who had experienced injustice or unhealthy lifestyles understood the power of redemption in their lives and wanted to share their personal experiences of such events. It was this form of personal authenticity that impressed the students because the teachers had the religious integrity – to integrate faith and life – as part of their RE teaching. Such a quality echoes the comments of the Congregation for Catholic Education (1982, para. 59):

The norms of the local bishop should be faithfully followed in everything that has to do with their own theological and pedagogical formation, and also in the course syllabi; and they should remember

that, in this area above all, life witness and an intensely lived spirituality have an especially great importance.

Witness here meant that teachers had an understanding and appreciation for a particular lived experience. They had a knowledge and empathy of what it really felt like to become a believer and accept the grace of God. After all, "it is difficult, if not impossible, to meaningfully teach what one does not know" (Fisher, 1999, p. 35) in matters dealing with spirituality and faith.

It was surprising to hear from the interviewees how they had spoken very little, if ever, to anyone about their motivation or reasons for why they would continue to teach Religious Education. Some of them became quite emotional in recounting their attitude towards RE teaching. While reflections about materials and strategies were communicated with others, the more important discussion of self-knowledge and integrity was ignored or suppressed. This lack of discourse is typical of the general teaching profession. While teachers talk about what they do, they rarely discuss how they see themselves and the qualities that make them a good teacher (Banner & Cannon, 1997, p. 4).

For recently assigned RE teachers such a discussion was crucial to whether they continued to teach RE classes. As is the case for novice teachers, teacher efficacy is a significant issue for RARE teachers (Onafowora, 2004). Where they felt they truly put themselves 'on the line' with their students, to be teachers of strong character (Banner & Cannon, 1997, p. 6), they needed to have the affirmation and support from their colleagues, the administration and the students themselves. Considering the emotive reactions expressed when asked about what they believed was 'best about RE', the teachers remained a 'bubbling pot' of feelings that, left unattended, desiccated their emotional and psychological energy (Cook & Engel, 2006). While Banner and Cannon (1997) referred to the pressures of teaching in general, the responsibilities recently assigned RE teachers felt with regard to the personal and spiritual formation of their students escalated the intensity of the pressures experienced.

Conclusion

The vocation of the recently assigned RE teacher is not a smooth or easy path. It is a journey of formation that entails personal and professional challenges. As much as the centrally prepared RE Units of Work assist RARE teachers in teaching RE confidently, the Units also challenge teachers in regard to their own personal and religious character as well as their conviction in RE teaching. Recently assigned RE teachers who were interviewed felt pressured to conform to an image of a Religious Educator that had yet to be attained by experience or training. In a sense, some teachers believed that they were called to live their faith by teaching RE whereas others felt that the personal dissonance was too much for them. RARE teachers needed time to develop and they needed opportunities to explore their personality and passions for RE teaching. In short, they required a holistic and ongoing formation as an RE teacher. Assumptions about all RARE teachers being at the same point in their professional, spiritual and religious formation are inaccurate; nor is it possible to assume that their formation is fully in alignment with faith stances presented in the RE Units. This study has indicated that special care and attention needs to be given to the formation of those starting out on the road of RE teaching.

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